

Institution: Royal Holloway, University of London
Unit of Assessment: English
Title of case study: Science Fiction: Genre Fiction and Cultural Value
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Professor Adam Roberts is a specialist in the literature and culture of science fiction (SF), and a creative writer: the author of 13 full-length novels, nine novella-length fictions, and dozens of short stories in the SF idiom. His research-led creative practice leads to three kinds of impact: first, in cultural life, Roberts influences and enriches public perceptions of SF, bringing a new critical self-consciousness to the form; secondly, he supports the SF sector by providing it with cultural capital, enhanced by his reconfiguration of its value; thirdly, sales of his works contribute economic capital to the publishing and SF industries.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Adam Roberts has been a prolific researcher in literary history and creative practice since his appointment to Royal Holloway in 1991. His work demonstrates that while SF is seriously valued as genre fiction, it is not commensurately valued as literature. Roberts argues that there needs to be a reincorporation into SF of irony, parody, and satire, embracing a strand within its own history and acknowledging older models (as provided by Swift, Voltaire, Verne et al). This pushes back the limiting boundaries of SF as genre fiction, limits that SF writers themselves have previously enforced by taking their own genre too seriously.</p> <p>His research in SF began in 1999 when he published his first science fiction novel, written concomitantly with his study <i>Science Fiction</i> (revised second edition 2005). In this and subsequent critical work, he is alert to trends in critical theory (including deployments of irony, parody, allusion and intertextuality) which nourish his fictional work. His <i>Palgrave History of SF</i> (2006), for example, locates the origins of the genre in the Protestant Reformation, and elaborates a divergent tradition of Sublime, or sense-of-wonder literary enchantment, via Protestant SF and Catholic 'Fantasy' traditions. It also develops a thesis about how important metaphor is to the genre (for example, the future is a metaphor for the present; another planet is a metaphor for our planet).</p> <p>Roberts' fiction affords concrete and creative reflections on these arguments. Through a creative-critical endeavour, a speciality of English at Royal Holloway, he generates a new kind of science fiction: formally more experimental than has been typical of the genre, conceptually more audacious, more self-reflexive and openly allusive to its own traditions. <i>Swiftly</i>, for example, rewires Swift's <i>Gulliver's Travels</i> and Voltaire's <i>Micromégas</i>, – key texts in the early history of SF, dramatising the fascination with scale, with the vast and the tiny, that is characteristic of SF more generally, and investigated critically by Roberts in the <i>Palgrave History of SF</i>. <i>Splinter</i> is a 21st-century updating of Jules Verne's <i>Hector Servadac</i>, interrogating the coherence of Verne's ideas of identity. Roberts includes his own translation of Verne's novel as an appendix to <i>Splinter</i>, foregrounding the intertextuality of his practice and its challenge to the marginal status of SF within traditional ideas of canonical authority and value. His argument for the metaphorical mode of expression in SF is evident in the 'alien invasion' novel, <i>Yellow Blue Tibia</i>. This deploys a 1980s Soviet setting to dramatise and satirise common tropes within SF of mass destruction, UFOs, and parallel realities. Through each of these, Roberts engages metaphorically with contemporary cultural</p>

anxieties. This practice is predicated upon the belief that SF, of all the major modes of literary art today, is best suited to this sort of project, being most hospitable to this fusion of criticism and creative practice. Through its success, there is an erosion of traditional distinctions between genre fiction and the 'literary'. The many accolades and positive reviews, as illustrated below, acknowledge this and other benefits of his research.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Critical work

1. *The Palgrave History of Science Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)
2. *Science Fiction* (Routledge 2000; 2nd ed, extensively revised, 2005).
3. Editor and contributor, *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. (Routledge, 2009)

Creative writing

4. *Jack Glass* (Gollancz, 2012)
5. *New Model Army* (Gollancz, 2010)
6. *By Light Alone* (Gollancz, 2008)

Author Page

7. <http://www.adamroberts.com/page/2/>

Prizes

The Palgrave History of SF (2006) was shortlisted for the BSFA non-fiction award; the novel *Gradisil* (2006) was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K Dick and Prometheus awards; *Swiftly* (2008) was shortlisted for the Sideways; *Yellow Blue Tibia* (2009) was shortlisted for Clarke, the BSFA and the Campbell awards, and widely listed amongst 'book of the year' choices; *New Model Army* (2010) was shortlisted for Campbell award; and *By Light Alone* was shortlisted for the BSFA Best Novel award (2012). *Jack Glass* won the BSFA award (2013) and the Campbell award (2013). Various posts on his blog *Punkadiddle* have been shortlisted for the BSFA non-fiction award and several of his short stories have won prizes.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impacts of Roberts' research since 2008 can be felt (1) in the field of cultural life, as attested by widespread, positive and dynamising responses from critics and day-to-day readers, and also in his influence on recent SF novels. (2) A tireless promoter of the SF sector through his diverse forms of output and communication, he contributes to the growth of what is a significant element within the culture industries. (3) His impact is also evident in contributions to the economic prosperity of the cultural sector, notably publishing, but also events.

(1). Through critical interpretation and the creation of cultural capital, Roberts, as reviews show, extends the perceptual range and enriches the imagination of the many individuals and groups who form the SF community. *Yellow Blue Tibia* (2006), as the first example of 'Soviet Noir', has spawned a new genre, claimed to have been taken up by Higgins' *Wolfhound Century* (2013) (see below, source 7). Many reviews indicate how he is raising

the status of the genre in the context of 'literary' fiction: *The Scotsman* wrote of *By Light Alone* (2008): "Two years ago, Kim Stanley Robinson declared that Adam Roberts ought to have won that year's Man Booker Prize for *Yellow Blue Tibia*. Roberts exists in that weird hinterland between literary and genre fiction. *By Light Alone* is both more interesting in terms of its ideas and more memorable in terms of the actual, sentence-by-sentence writing on the page than much of what passes as serious fiction. ... Maybe it's time for a new prize: not for "literary fiction" or "good reads" but for novels that actually challenge." With *New Model Army* (2009) his influence over the field was acknowledged as revitalising; *The Zone*, an SF website, declared that it "is a book that has the potential to **reinvigorate science fiction** as a literature **central to the cultural and political life** of the 20th Century [it] attempts to forge a new way of looking at human events. A mode that seems well suited to this particular time and this particular place and, as a result, the novel has the potential to change things." The same novel produced the following in *SFX Magazine*: "when Gollancz calls Roberts one of the **most important writers of his generation**, it's something of an understatement: this man puts art at the heart of our genre," demonstrating his agency in fashioning new conceptions of Science Fiction for a widening readership. *Jack Glass* (2013), was described by the administrators of the British Science Fiction Award, decided through the votes of readers, as "an amazing book, which successfully blends crime and science fiction ... highly intelligent and skillful storytelling... one of the finest writers we currently have working in the English language. Roberts... has acquired a reputation for writing novels that specifically set out to 'mess with' some aspect of genre history". The artist Heman Chong was inspired by Roberts' work to produce two original artworks (2012).

(2). This reputation makes him a prolific and sought-after communicator about the values of SF. He engages with a rich variety of audiences beyond HEIs through books, newspapers, magazines, television and radio, blogs, twitter, internet magazines, and other fora. His frequent broadcast appearances include BBC4, Channel 4, the History Channel, BBC2 ('Newsnight'), Radio 2, Radio 3 ('Night Waves'), Radio 4 ('Open Book', 'Today', 'Front Row' and others), BBC World Service, BBC London and other local stations. As a public educator about SF, he has brought to light new conceptions, forms and histories of the genre, provoking and inspiring that community, while reaching beyond it and attracting new audiences. On goodreads.com his novels have attracted (since 2008) 882 readers' reviews with c. 5,500 individual ratings. He reaches large audiences through reviewing SF books for the *Guardian*, on the blog *The Valve* (<http://bit.ly/kIUuPG>, regular audience of about 30-40,000) and *Punkadiddle* (viewed by 235,000 people), provoking lively debate (see 'references'). All of this creates significant support for the SF industry. His impact as a popular author has fed back into research: in April 2013 there was a conference devoted to his work at Lincoln University, attended by academics but also non-academics.

(3). With this extensive and growing readership, Roberts' books achieve high sales. Publishers and booksellers have invested in this work, and the sales result in rich rewards for their industry. Roberts' novels sell c.10-25,000 copies in the UK with many more overseas. They are also translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Czech, Greek, Swedish, Finnish, Russian, Korean and Chinese. The total number of Roberts' books sold by Gollancz stands at 496,000 copies. *The Soddit* alone, his parody of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, sold 150,000 copies, bringing considerable profits to Gollancz. In addition there are foreign rights and film advances and option revenue.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

For corroboration of sales and prizes, contact:

1. Professor Roberts' Publisher.

The following selection of reviews and blog posts serves to indicate the impacts of Roberts's work on the field of Science Fiction:

2. 2008, November, *The Scotsman* review of *By Light Alone*

<http://www.scotsman.com/news/book-reviews-new-model-army-kraken-the-resoration-game-1-476750>

3. August 2010, blog review of *New Model Army*

<http://ruthlessculture.com/2012/12/17/jack-glass-2012-apply-story-to-end-confusion/>

4. September 2010, *The Zone* review of *New Model Army*

<http://www.zone-sf.com/wordworks/nwadamro.html>

5. August 2011, SFX Magazine.

<http://www.sfx.co.uk/2011/08/19/by-light-alone-by-adam-roberts-book-review/>

6. Feb 2013, *The Guardian* review of *Jack Glass*

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/feb/15/adam-roberts-last-sci-fi-writer>

7. March 2013, Blog review describing Roberts's influence

<http://www.readerling.com/2013/03/wolfhound-century-by-peter-higgins.html>

8. 2013 British Science Fiction Awards

<http://www.bsfa.co.uk/category/bsfa-awards/>

For evidence of Roberts's impact on original artwork, see:

9. The artist Heman Chong has designed book covers based on Roberts' novels *Land of the Headless* and *Snow*

<http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/artists/heman-chong#slide-series-0213.land-of-the-headlessadam-roberts>

and

<http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/artists/heman-chong#slide-series-0215.the-snowadam-roberts>

(go to numbers 20 and 22).

10. The band 'Cave' wrote a song 'Adam Roberts' on their album *Neverendless*. A recording can be sourced on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78WqmtpSQQs>