

What-If Scenarios

by Deborah P. Kolodji, California

At first, science fiction and haiku would seem to be incompatible. A science fiction novel explores various imagined, what- if scenarios in fictional settings. In contrast, haiku captures a real moment in a few short lines.

Science fiction poetry has been around since Homer's *Odyssey*, but science fiction haiku, alternatively known as "sci- faiku" and "speculative haiku" is a relatively new but fast-growing phenomenon. Speculative haiku is regularly printed in genre poetry mainstays such as the Science Fiction Poetry Association's *Star*Line* and *Dreams and Nightmares*.

Scifaikuest, a journal by Sam's Dot Publishing specializing in science fiction and horror haiku, has been producing quarterly print and online issues (with different content) since 2002, but haiku has been making occasional appearances in science fiction literature for more than forty years.

One of the earliest examples can be found in Philip K. Dick's 1963 Hugo Award [1] winning novel, *The Man in the High Castle*. [2] In his novel, Dick contemplates an alternative future where the United States has lost World War II and is under occupation by Germany and Japan. At the end of Chapter 3, an associate of Nobusuke Tagomi, a trade missionary in Japanese-occupied San Francisco, quotes Buson as part of the dialog:

Mr. Kotomichi said, "*As the spring rains fall, soaking in them, on the roof, is a child's rag ball.*" [3]

Thai-American musical composer and science fiction writer, S.P. Somtow, sprinkles quotes from classic Japanese haiku throughout his 1981 novel *Starship & Haiku* [4]. The novel starts with a haiku from Onitsura used as an epigram:

Look! Skeletons
in their best holiday clothes
viewing flowers

Onitsura

and ends with this haiku:

On the sick journey
across the withered fields—
the dreams run still!

Bashō

In addition to Onitsura and Basho, Somtow quotes haiku from Issa and Buson. He also divides his novel into four parts, the first three alluding to Basho: "The Sound of Water," "Cherry Blossoms," "Summer Grasses," and the fourth, "The Last Line of the Haiku."

A "first contact" story published in 1981, but now best considered as alternative history, *Starship & Haiku* is set in a fictional 1997-2025. In Somtow's novel, the alien communication is with whales, an interesting coincidence because David Brin's 1983 haiku-quoting novel *Startide Rising* [5] features another sea mammal, the dolphin. *Startide Rising* won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards [6] in 1984

and is the second book in Brin's popular *Uplift* series, which revolves around the genetic modification of non-sapient species into thinking ones. Brin's genetically modified dolphins communicate through *Trinery*, an invented language loosely based upon haiku:

Listen—
For the swishing tail
Of the tiger shark— [7]

In addition to similar examples of the *Trinery* language scattered throughout the 500-page novel, one of Brin's characters, Tom Orley, himself a product of mild genetic engineering, quotes two haiku from Buson. He quotes the "rag ball" haiku that Philip K. Dick used in *The Man in the High Castle*, in addition to:

Blossoms on the pear,
and a woman in the moonlight, Blossoms
reads a letter there . . .

Buson [8]

Brin's haiku-like dolphin language is also featured in other *Uplift* novels, such as *Brightness Reef* [9] in 1995 and *Infinity's Shore* [10] in 1996. He also incorporates one of his own attempts at a 5-7-5 haiku as an interlude in a non-*Uplift* series novel, *The Postman*. [11]

Neal Stephenson and Janet McNaughton both have produced novels with haiku-writing characters. Unfortunately these characters are also writing using a strictly 5-7-5 haiku definition. Stephenson's Marine Corporal Bobby Shaftoe's haiku starts the 1999 novel *Cryptonomicon* and is described as "the best that Corporal Bobby Shaftoe can do on short notice." [12] McNaughton's Kayko Miyazaki, in the young adult novel *The Raintree Rebellion*, is attributed as the author of several chapter epigrams. McNaughton displays more of a haiku sensibility:

At dawn the crows call
the moon beyond the water.
We must leave this peace. [13]

Wren Valere, the heroine of Laura Anne Gilman's *Retrievers* novels, [14] uses haiku-like poems as magic spells. John Scalzi's Zoe receives a 5-7-5 haiku as a PDA love message from her boyfriend in *Zoe's Tale*, [15] one of the nominees for the 2009 Hugo Award.

However, the best examples of the intersection of haiku with science fiction are not from the occasional appearance of a haiku or haiku-like poem in a novel. They come as products of the thriving speculative poetry community and are found in the varied print and web-based science fiction, fantasy, and horror poetry journals currently being published. Names familiar to the haiku community can be found in the pages of these publications.

first snowfall
after the asteroid
no footprints
Ann K. Schwader [16]

if only dogs
could run free
on the moon
Kendall Evans [17]
face in the mirror

he still sees the wart
from his frog days

Deborah P. Kolodji [18]

Good speculative haiku is immediate and captures a real moment from an imagined scenario. Ann K. Schwader may have been walking in Denver snow and contemplating the aftermath of an asteroid collision. Kendall Evans may have been thinking of his own dogs, fenced in his Whittier, California backyard and how they'd love to roam free in a place with no fences.

There are times when a what-if scenario can recall a moment from real life even more vividly than describing the actual occurrence. Evans' poem would be far less effective if he had written, "what if/dogs could run free/on the plains" or "what if/dogs could run free/in the forest" because these versions lose the sense of utter impossibility. A city dog is fenced and cannot run free. Introducing the moon in the poem somehow better conveys its plight.

Science fiction writing at its best, examines a current problem through the lens of an imagined society. Science fiction haiku can crystallize the essence of a real moment through an imagined landscape.



Works Cited

1. The Hugo Awards are presented each year at the World Science Fiction Convention. The first Hugo Award was presented in 1953 and the awards have been presented every year since 1955.
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3. In an acknowledgements section, Dick attributes the translation to Harold G. Henderson from the *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, Volume One, compiled and edited by Donald Keene, Grove Press, 1955.
4. Somtow, S.P. *Starship & Haiku*, ©1981, Timescape, Pocket Books.
5. Brin, David. *Startide Rising*, ©1983, Bantam Books.
6. The Nebula Awards are awarded annually by members of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.
7. From *Startide Rising* by David Brin, Page 316.
8. From *Startide Rising* by David Brin, Page 454.
9. Brin, David. *Brightness Reef*, © 1995 Bantam Books.
10. Brin, David. *Infinity's Shore*, ©1996 Bantam Books.
11. Brin, David. *The Postman*, ©1985 Bantam Books.
12. Stephenson, Neal. *Cryptonomicon*, ©1999 Avon Books.
13. From *The Raintree Rebellion* by Janet McNaughton, Epigram for Chapter 21, Page 168.
14. Laura Anne Gilman has written a series of Retrievers Novels for Luna Books, including *Staying Dead* in 2004 and *Bring It On* in 2006.
15. Scalzi, John. *Zoe's Tale*, ©2008 Tor Books.



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*can be found in a variety of publications including **Modern Haiku**, **Frogpond**, **Strange Horizons**, **Star*Line**, **Scifaikuest**, **Comstock Review**, **Pearl**, **Tales of the Talisman**, **THEMA**, **The Magazine of Speculative Poetry**, **Goblin Fruit**, **bottle rockets** and **The Heron's Nest**.*