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Dare to Know

Space Operas (Fiction)

Large-scale action and adventure fiction involving space travel.

A sub-genre that involves vast distances, strange worlds and cultures, swashbuckling action, and epic, panoramic settings. Even though “space operas” popularized science fiction in the 1920s and 1930s, the term was used as a pejorative by author Wilson Tucker in 1941, and many hardcore fans similarly scorned them. Ultimately, though, the form was widely recognized as a legitimate literary sub-genre by the 1990s. Space operas are distinguished by sweeping themes, emotional plots, and a sizable cast of larger-than-life characters. Protagonists typically take on matters larger than themselves, and plots depict their struggles to prevail. There is usually a romantic and/or melodramatic approach to storytelling, and the narrative contains a great deal of adventure. Stories take place on a sprawling, galactic-sized backdrop with an array of planets, galaxies, and dimensions—each possessing a distinctive flora and fauna, as well as unique life forms, customs, and civilizations. Many plots involve intergalactic rivalries and conflicts, intrigue, and events that can span the known universe and affect thousands, if not millions, of lives. This formula is suitable for lengthy story and character arcs. The stories do not always hold true to the accepted laws of science, mathematics, or the nature of space. Indeed, technology is ubiquitous but secondary to the plot. While some technological aspects may be explained, most are simply accepted within the narrative as a fact.

Common topos include mysteries from the depths of space, the rise and fall of whole civilizations, entire species of alien races, and empires that span star systems or even galaxies. Modern reworkings of the sub-genre have replaced the optimistic, “gee whiz” tone of yesteryear with one that is darker, more pessimistic, and cynical. Recent authors have depicted a humanity that is not preeminent in the universe and whose future is far from secure. Space operas grew out of earlier “planetary romance” stories and can overlap with **military science fiction**, but the focus of space operas is more on adventurous stories and melodrama and less on the technical aspects of futuristic warfare. Additionally, protagonists in space operas are frequently civilians or members of a paramilitary organization rather than regular military personnel. Robert William Cole’s *The Struggle for Empire* (1900), George Griffith’s *A Honeymoon in Space* (1901), J. Schlossel’s “The Second Swarm” (1928), Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* (1942), E. E. “Doc” Smith’s *The Skylark of Space* (1946) and *Triplanetary* (1948), Jack Williamson’s *The Legion of Space* (1947), Edmond Hamilton’s *The Star Kings* (1947), Leigh Brackett’s “Queen of the Martian Catacombs” (1949), Cary Rockwell’s *Stand By For Mars* (1952), Poul Anderson’s *Agent of the Terran Empire* (1965), and Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965) are influential examples.

Common Elements

Colorful and dramatic space adventures	Deep space exploration
Risk-taking action	Personification of spaceships
Interstellar war	Harrowing escapes
Galactic politics	Rebellion

Benefits of Reading

Provides readers with thrilling adventures in space	Offers readers tales of intergalactic conflict
Permits readers to explore epic characters and strange worlds	Allows readers to speculate on the nature of spacefaring civilizations

Modern Literary Examples

<i>Ancillary Justice</i> (2013) by Ann Leckie	<i>Hammered</i> (2004) by Elizabeth Bear
<i>Appleseed</i> (2002) by John Clute	<i>Hold Fast Through the Fire</i> (2021) by K. B. Wagers
<i>Architects of Memory</i> (2020) by Karen Osborne	<i>In the Black</i> (2020) by Patrick S. Tomlinson
<i>Artifact Space</i> (2021) by Miles Cameron	<i>The Last Watch</i> (2021) by J. S. Dewes
<i>A Big Ship at the Edge of the Galaxy</i> (2018) by Alex White	<i>Leviathan Wakes</i> (2011) by James S. A. Corey
<i>Black Star Renegades</i> (2018) by Michael Moreci	<i>Light</i> (2002) by M. John Harrison
<i>The Centauri Device</i> (1974) by M. John Harrison	<i>Lucifer's Star</i> (2016) by C. T. Phipps
<i>Chilling Effect</i> (2019) by Valerie Valdes	<i>A Red Peace</i> (2018) by Spencer Ellsworth
<i>Consider Phlebas</i> (1987) by Iain M. Banks	<i>On a Red Station, Drifting</i> (2012) by Aliette de Bodard
<i>Deathstalker</i> (1995) by Simon R. Green	<i>Polaris Rising</i> (2019) by Jessie Mihalik
<i>Downbelow Station</i> (1981) by C. J. Cherryh	<i>The Reality Dysfunction Part 1: Emergence</i> (1997) by Peter F. Hamilton
<i>The Eighty-Minute Hour</i> (1974) by Brian Wilson Aldiss	<i>Revenger</i> (2017) by Alastair Reynolds
<i>The Eternity War</i> (2017) by Jamie Sawyer	<i>The Risen Empire</i> (2003) by Scott Westerfeld
<i>Exile's Throne</i> (2018) by Rhonda Mason	<i>Salvation</i> (2018) by Peter F. Hamilton
<i>Eyes of the Void</i> (2022) by Adrian Tchaikovsky	<i>Shooting the Rift</i> (2016) by Alex Stewart
<i>Dune: The Duke of Caladan</i> (2020) by Brian Herbert	<i>Some Desperate Glory</i> (2023) by Emily Tesh
<i>A Fire Upon the Deep</i> (1992) by Vernor Vinge	<i>Ten Low</i> (2021) by Stark Holborn
<i>The Galaxy, and the Ground Within</i> (2021) by Becky Chambers	<i>There Before the Chaos</i> (2018) by K. B. Wagers
	<i>Valiant Dust</i> (2017) by Richard Baker
	<i>We Have Always Been Here</i> (2021) by Lena Nguyen