

SCIENCE FICTION WITH BITE

the  
**SAVAGE**  
humanists



Edited by  
**Fiona  
Kelleghan**

Stories by

John Kessel

Tim Sullivan

Gregory Frost

James Morrow

Jonathan Lethem

James Patrick Kelly

Kim Stanley Robinson

Robert J. Sawyer

Connie Willis

**Educator's Guide**

the  
**SAVAGE**  
humanists

## Educator's Guide

Educator's Guide by Fiona Kelleghan



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## Introduction

This guide, an accompaniment to the critical reprint anthology *The Savage Humanists* (2008), contains suggestions for the teacher who would like to use the anthology in the classroom. It gives some basic information about each story (publication history, awards and nominations), offers preparations before assigning a story to be read, and adds questions and exercises to ask the students after the story has been read.

Though each story has its own moral(s) to convey, there are some similarities in themes. With this in mind, the teacher might want to ask herself or himself some initial questions.

If you teach, or have taught, science fiction or fantasy classics, you are probably used to discussing the theme of Good versus Evil. Many of these stories of Savage Humanism, mostly set in a world recognizable to us, also consider the problems of Good and Evil. Think about how you can apply what you have taught before – for example, from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien to those of J. K. Rowling, from Alfred Bester to Philip K. Dick to William Gibson – to these near-future or adjacent-world short stories.

Which texts have you taught before that discuss American history and politics as topics or thematic material within the fiction?

Each of the Savage Humanist writers uses factual history and irony and/or satire to convey a message, many of them political. In the first story, Gregory Frost’s “Madonna of the Maquiladora,” Frost uses recent historical American outsourcing of jobs to Mexico as a contemporary problem in need of serious fixing, and the fable supplies an unexpected brand of horror. Frost’s sense is that the United States, self-nominated as the world’s superpower, is severely letting the world down. His narrator thinks: “Between the images and the facts, you’re lost and grasping for some sort of reality. This is what a series of smiling presidents promised the world?” His Mexican character, an ally named Margarita, tells the narrator, “The maquiladora is the whole world now” and “you see it all in black and white, Norte Americano versus us.”

John Kessel portrays historical facts to describe the Spanish conquest of the Americas, but also, while describing an alien invasion of Earth, uses whimsy and breaks the fourth wall to allow a funny and desirable, if hilariously implausible, ending.

Connie Willis showcases the contemporary urban fear of over-construction of one’s city as background to create a not-quite-friendship between a literate white journalist and an imperfectly articulate Native American, using solecistic misunderstandings to create a surprise-twist ending that is literally golden.

How can the stories by Frost, Kessel and Willis be compared and contrasted with regard to the American mythos? Meanwhile, Tim Sullivan’s “Zeke” deals with a Northerner’s expectations, and changes thereto, of the Deep South, and Kim Stanley Robinson’s novella is concerned with world history, specifically the history of war and peace.

James Morrow’s “Veritas” and James Patrick Kelly’s “Think Like a Dinosaur” differ from those listed above in that they respond, more or less directly, to earlier works: Morrow to George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Kelly to Tom Godwin’s “The Cold Equations.” They are, however, as didactic as the rest of the included stories; and they are concerned with questions of self, individualism, and comparative anthropology.

You will need to make some decisions about how you choose to present these concerns to your students, especially when contending with works that express hostility toward religious beliefs and other match point topics.

In my Introduction to *The Savage Humanists*, I offer a list of key elements and styles to define this literary subgenre or movement within science fiction. Important among these, and critical to keep in mind as you plan your curriculum, are a pronounced emphasis on reason and skepticism, a hatred of hypocrisy, an anger toward the negative side of human nature (specifically cruelty and malgovernance), and a gift for humor and comedic invention.

While some of these works are forthrightly more intentionally humorous than others, all of them sparkle with facets of wit, and a careful reading will discover jokes in even the darkest of the stories.

## Madonna of the Maquiladora

by Gregory Frost  
Pages 69-105

“Madonna of the Maquiladora” was first published in *Asimov’s Science Fiction* (May 2002). It was a finalist for both the Nebula Award and the Tiptree Award, the latter of which is an annual prize for works of science fiction that expand or explore one’s understanding of gender.

### Before Reading

#### The Setting

Your students should become familiar with a few basic facts about Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which lies across the U.S. border from El Paso, Texas. Such facts might include its status as one of the fastest growing cities in the world; its industrial reliance upon assembly factories, “maquiladoras”; and its high crime and poverty rates.

#### Outsourcing

Be prepared to discuss how economic globalization and compartmentalization of assembly-line manufactured machine parts serve, in Frost’s view, to maintain a distance between First World and Third World societies.

#### Surveillance

Do the managerial observers on the catwalk suggest George Orwell’s “Big Brother”? Explain to your students the type of prison building designed by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) known as the Panopticon. Be prepared to discuss how Frost’s story harks back to Orwell and / or the Panopticon.

#### Religious Faith

Frost’s title suggests two of the main themes of the story: religious faith and the desperation of the religious poor. He also dramatizes the psychology of the minds that create these phenomena, and that believe in them. Discuss with your students the history of Marian apparitions, or “sightings of the Virgin Mary,” and poll them on their acceptance of such sightings ranging from Our Lady of Lourdes to Diane Duyser’s toasted cheese sandwich said to bear an image of the Virgin, which made news in 2004.

### After Reading

Why does the narrator, “the Deputy,” decide to do the job? Ask your students what they know about photojournalism in foreign countries and its risks. Can they answer the Deputy’s questions about Margarita: “How does she live forever on the edge, capturing death, surrounded, drenched in it? How can anybody live this way?” What events make the Deputy change his dreams of “awards and recognition” to a determination to expose the “scam”?

Photojournalism, like other forms of journalism, is bound by codes of ethics. Baum knows how the Deputy “felt about the power of photography” and he tells Coopersmith that the Deputy is “into image manipulation”; how does these dovetail with Frost’s concerns about corporate methods of surveillance and mind control?

Discuss with your students the irony that Perea works as an assembler in a factory that produces parts for “motion controller systems.” How does this job match Frost’s themes?

Despite the Deputy’s anger about religious faith, he three times uses the term “betrayal” to express his shame about using Perea and Margarita. In the context of Marian apparitions, do your students express agnosticism? Do they share Frost’s outrage and anger about religious hoaxes?

Frost’s story features a rare use of the second-person point-of-view as narrative voice. Why would he do this? Is he implicating his American readership in the political discourse of the story?

## **Chibola**

by **Connie Willis**  
Pages 107-130

“Cibola” was first published in Isaac Asimov’s *Science Fiction Magazine* (December 1990) and as a chapbook and in audio edition in 1998. It was nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1991.

### **Before Reading**

#### The History

Like John Kessel’s “Invaders”, Willis’s “Cibola” relies on the history of the conquistadors to build her story. Where Kessel chooses to write about Hernán Cortez, Willis selects Francisco Vázquez de Coronado (1510-1554), a Spanish Conquistador. Have your students read about Coronado’s expedition to conquer Cibola, one of the mythical “Seven Cities of Gold,” which Coronado’s guide, friar Marcos de Niza (c. 1495-1558), claimed to have seen.

Discuss why the conquistadors came to America with a ruthless obsession to discover gold – as much as possible – and the atrocities that resulted from their quest.

#### Journalistic Decisions

Carla Johnson, the narrator, is also a seeker – she writes features for a newspaper based in Denver, Colorado. As the opening paragraphs establish, she is willing to accept “nutty” assignments from her boss, and she does have a sense of humor about them, but she also views them with skepticism and some frustration. Her latest assignment is to interview the great-granddaughter of Coronado, who “says she knows where the Seven Cities of Cibola are.”

The story which Carla would much rather cover is about a moratorium on building skyscrapers in Denver. This might sound less interesting than solving a centuries-old mystery about the location of the Cities of Gold, but it is central to the plot. Your students can do an online newspaper search to discover how many times, in this country, such moratoriums have been demanded by residents of cities who fear the “Manhattanization” of their towns, during the last few decades alone. One of the problems caused by overconstruction is traffic gridlock, which Carla endures throughout the story.

#### Skepticism

Connie Willis’s works frequently deal with debunking pseudoscience, superstition, specious mysticism and the occult. Carla dismisses “nuttos,” UFOs and the I Ching. Her journalistic instincts and innate cynicism drive her to check the facts constantly, and she grows exasperated when she believes she is being sent on a series of wild-goose chases. Before your students read this story, it might be interesting to poll them to see how many will admit to belief in horoscopes, paranormal phenomena, Native American spirituality or other fringe belief systems.

### **After Reading**

How does Willis plant clues during the moratorium scenes and descriptions of downtown that will lead to the climactic revelation?

Carla’s view of “nuttos” does not change during the course of the story, so why does she continue to take Rosa to find the Cities of Gold, even when she discovers Rosa’s errors? Do you agree with Carla that Rosa’s lack of “pseudo-scientific jargon” and preference for doughnuts over “psychic charts” makes her more credible than the other “nuttos”?

What kind of story do you think Carla will write for her newspaper?

## **Invaders**

**by John Kessel**  
**Pages 131-160**

“Invaders” was originally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (October 1990). Critically acclaimed, the story has been reprinted several times.

### **Before Reading**

#### The History

Have your students discuss the historical meeting between Francisco Pizarro (d. 1541), a Spanish conquistador and conqueror of the Incan Empire, and Atahualpa (d. 1533), the Empire’s last Emperor. Prepare them to understand how an inpouring of wealth into a market can create international turmoil – a different type of invasion.

#### Expectations

A story entitled “Invaders” and published in a science fiction magazine might reasonably be presumed to be about an extraterrestrial invasion of Earth. The teacher could create a list of a few classic textual and cinematic examples of such.

#### Genre

Consider works that combine genres, such as the Western and horror in *The Searchers*, or the horror and comedy in *Ghostbusters* or *Little Shop of Horrors*. “Invaders” features aspects of many genres: science fiction, the historical, fantasy, and (faux) autobiography. As an exercise, you might prepare your students to list which genres of fiction they consider most important to an understanding of any story with a suggestive title, and consider making it an assignment that they take notes, identifying genres or clichés, while they read it.

### **After Reading**

What assumptions does Kessel expect his readers to bring to this story? Were your students surprised that Kessel begins, rather than with a science fictional invasion from outer space, with a fable about a historical invasion? When the next section (remind your students that 2001 would be “the future” from the standpoint of 1990, when the story was published) features Norwood Delacroix, an All-American football champion, stepping forward bravely to meet the landing spaceship, what were their expectations? They might answer: a hostile alien invasion, or a “Take me to your leader” scenario. Were they surprised to learn that the Krel visit for cocaine and “for kicks”? Have them discuss other expectations and surprises.

Why does Kessel repeatedly use the phrase “the power of prayer”?

It has been written by many historians that conquistadors came to America “for God, gold, and glory.” They were charged with converting the Native Americans to Catholicism. Do you think that, in Kessel’s story, these obligations were valued equally by Pizarro and Father Valverde?

Discuss the fact that the conquistadors slaughtered several thousand Inca with an initial sneaky ambush and with the superior technology of cavalry and steel weapons and armor; afterward, they ascribe credit to the apostle Saint James (Santiago) and the power of prayer. Next, consider how Flash describes the Krel’s interstellar travel as based on both physics and the power of prayer. Do your students understand that Kessel takes an ironic stance toward “the power of prayer” in both the claims of Catholicism and of his fictional aliens?

What parallels do your students draw between the conquistadors and the Krel? Compare their views on God, empire, and pursuit of treasure.



Kessel tests his reader in many ways. Discuss with your students Flash’s view of literature as oppression and Kessel’s suggestion that science fiction is like crack addiction. Is he being ironic? Do your students agree with either argument?

This story juxtaposes horrific scenes with comedy. Which do your students find most effective, and why?

A great many science fiction works start from historical facts and wind up in the “Alternate History” subgenre. Did your students understand the last section, dated 1527? Do they find it humorous? Is it a parody on Alternate Histories? How do they explain its effectiveness as an ending to this series of vignettes?

How does Kessel use the American mythos which so many stories are structured upon? Which different types of stories does he base this one on? How does he tell us what we think we already know, and then challenge those assumptions? How does he meld a variety of ideas and genres into one story? You can assign such questions, or similar ones, for your students to write brief essays about.

## **Zeke**

by **Tim Sullivan**  
Pages 161-177

“Zeke” was originally published in *The Twilight Zone Magazine* (October 1981). It was nominated for the Nebula Award in 1982.

### **Before Reading**

#### Freaks

The word “freak” is important in this story. Ask your students to define what it means to them.

On the first page, the narrator, George Hallahan, refers to “my freakishness,” by which he means that he is a biological sport, a freak of nature, a mutant.

In the next sentence, though, he remembers his friends of the 1960s as “freewheelin’ hippie ‘freaks’”—a pejorative term used by conservative Americans against liberals, possibly from its meaning of “drug user” (dating from 1945) or from its older meaning of something twisted or distorted. George says, “How do you define a freak, anyway? The word is used to hurt more often than to inform or amuse.” Do your students agree, or has the term undergone “linguistic amelioration”?

Have you or your students ever seen an advertisement for a freak show while on a road trip? Have you ever visited one? If not, do you think it would be an enjoyable or a disappointing experience?

#### Characterization

George self-identifies as “an ex-hippie,” cynical and disillusioned with a defeatist attitude. To understand his character, it is necessary to know about the ideals of college-age youth in the 1960s and their disappointment when those ideals never crystallized. Explain to your students what the Summer of Love was. Have them read about the Democratic National Convention events of 1968 and 1972, to understand why George says, “The tear gas and truncheons the cops wielded at the political conventions at Miami Beach in ’72 taught me a valuable lesson about the way things *are*, as opposed to the way I thought they ought to be.”

#### Allusions

Sullivan alludes to the popular culture of the era about which he writes. How familiar are your students with *The Twilight Zone* television series and with its host, Rod Serling; and with the musical group Procol Harum and their song “A Whiter Shade of Pale”? What other references do they recognize?

#### Revival and Redemption

As regards Zeke’s name and appearance, have your students familiarize themselves with the story of Ezekiel, the Biblical prophet, and particularly about his revival of the dead as told in Chapter 37, lines 1-10 of the *Book of Ezekiel*. They may be familiar already with the traditional spiritual song “Dry Bones” (“The knee bone connected to the thigh bone,” et cetera), which is based on those lines.

Also, discuss with them Edvard Munch’s painting, “The Scream,” an influence on Sullivan’s description of the extraterrestrial’s appearance and anguish.

## After Reading

Why does Sullivan choose to set his story in backwoods Florida of the 1970s, rather than a futuristic setting?

How are George’s political disappointments related to his personal failures? His biggest failure, in his own eyes, is the loss of his five-year-old son Danny to his ex-wife after their divorce. In the story, he has two goals, both of which must be accomplished very soon: to visit the Freak Show, and to get a present to Danny for his upcoming sixth birthday. How does his character change, psychologically, through the events of the story?

What was your first reaction to Mrs. Nickerson? How does Sullivan dramatize George’s reaction to her? Do you feel that George got some measure of revenge when his last comment to her “freaked her out”?

What is George feeling when he first meets Zeke? What do you think of Bump Nickerson’s and Levon’s friendship with Zeke? How complex do you think that friendship is?

How do the ways in which both George and Zeke regard their approaches toward true societal alienation differ? Sullivan is implicitly criticizing the movie *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), which, in his view, glibly romanticizes the plight of the stranger in a strange land. How does “Zeke” resemble Robert J. Sawyer’s “Flashes,” two stories which contain the insight that contact with extraterrestrials might not be at all what Hollywood depicts?

How does Zeke’s “laying on of hands” cure George? How is it related to the way that Ezekiel revived the dry bones to health?

Do you consider the story’s ending to be tragic? Upbeat? Both?

## Think Like a Dinosaur

by James Patrick Kelly

Pages 179-203

“Think Like a Dinosaur” was originally published in *Asimov’s Science Fiction* magazine (June 1995). It won the 1996 Hugo Award for Best Novelette, the *Asimov’s* Reader’s Poll Award, and the SF Chronicle Award.

### Before Reading

#### Origin Story

Have your students read Tom Godwin’s 1954 short story “The Cold Equations” (which is available in many anthologies and online). Explain to them that the story was assigned to be written by Godwin at the instruction of *Astounding Science-Fiction* editor John W. Campbell. Discuss with them Campbell’s dictum that writers submitting stories to *Astounding* must be familiar with science. Your students might be surprised to learn that Godwin had to re-write the story three times, because Campbell insisted that the young woman had to die in the ending, whereas Godwin kept trying to find a way to save her. “The Cold Equations” is didactic, because it dramatizes that human whims and dreams cannot overrule the dictates of the laws of physics.

#### Point of View

Discuss the various ways in which the third-person-limited point of view (sometimes called the “over the shoulder” perspective) can be used to strengthen a story. Consider how Godwin’s story would be different if he had used first person, whether from Barton’s or Marilyn’s point of view. How would an omniscient narrator have changed the emotional impact of the story?

#### Making Decisions

Godwin writes, “Existence required order, and there was order; the laws of nature, irrevocable and immutable. Men could learn to use them, but men could not change them.” Ask your students how they feel when trapped between two choices, neither of which has a pleasant outcome, and how they decide which to choose.

Familiarize your students with the famous hypothetical problem involving a switchman overseeing the approach of a train carrying five passengers. The train is speeding and will crash unless the switchman toggles a switch that will shunt the locomotive onto a spur (a track that branches from the main line). To his horror, he sees that a friend of his is walking along the spur. Psychological studies suggest that most people will choose to sacrifice one to save five. (This psychological experiment has been widely published and can easily be found online, in variations.)

### After Reading

In a variation of the speeding train problem, the switchman is standing beside an enormous man whose bulk would be enough to slow the train to safety – *if* he is pushed onto the track. This raises the psychological bar, because there is an emotional difference between pushing a switch and pushing a man. Discuss how the first version resembles “The Cold Equations” and the second resembles “Think Like a Dinosaur.”

Ask your students to consider how Kelly raises the psychological stakes even higher: Michael can save Kamala’s life, but at the price of humankind’s being allowed “to join the galactic club” or to lose the rights to Hanen technologies, “jeopardizing the future of humanity in space”: a consummation devoutly *not* to be wished by the rest of humanity. What decision would your students make, in Michael’s place?

The conclusion of Godwin’s story includes the line, “A cold equation had been balanced and he was alone on the ship.” In both stories, “balancing the equation” is a euphemism for murder. Have your students discuss the moments during which Michael switches over to being able to think like a dinosaur. Do they think Kelly wrote it effectively? Would they react in the same way?

Why does Michael call the Hanen dinosaurs? Is he suggesting that Campbell’s attitudes were cold-blooded and old-fashioned?

## Walking the Moons

by Jonathan Lethem

Pages 205-211

“Walking the Moons” was originally published in the magazine *New Pathways* (1990) and has been multiply reprinted, notably in *The Year’s Best Science Fiction: Eighth Annual Collection* (edited by Gardner R. Dozois, 1991).

### Before Reading

#### History of Virtual Reality

Remind your students that this story was published in 1990, when virtual reality was not as common an idea as it is in the 21st century, except in science fiction. A famous example, with which some might be acquainted, is the short story “The Veldt” (1951) by Ray Bradbury. The movie *Brainstorm* (1983) showed scientists developing a way to record one’s thoughts and physical experiences and allow others to share them. The device in this film was based on the virtual reality and augmented “reality head mounted display” designed in 1968 by Ivan Sutherland and Bob Sproull. The term “cyberspace” was coined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. 1985 saw the launch of the Discovery Channel, the easiest way to travel the globe vicariously from your home. All of these serve as precursors to “Walking the Moons.”

#### Pioneers

Ask your students how they envision pioneers and explorers. The Man Who Walks the Moon of Io considers himself both a pioneer and an artist of sorts. He expects his audience to be fans and to have an emotional investment in his walks. Engage your students by asking which forms of art they find emotionally rewarding, including the visual arts, performance art, etc.

### After Reading

This story was written long before the launch of YouTube, the video sharing website created in 2005. Ask your students if they would enjoy broadcasting such a walk, and which adventures they would choose to share with others. In the realm of YouTube, which broadcasts do they consider to be special? Why?

How does Lethem de-romanticize the idea of virtual reality? Ask your students to list five ways in which the glamour of visiting another world is undermined.

The Man Who says, “Maybe my fans can’t really identify with my off-world walks, maybe they’re feeling, who knows, a little, uh, alienated by this Io thing. I know I am.” Do your students believe that The Man Who is making an emotional connection with his audience? Is his communicated experience exciting enough to generate fans, or is it merely narcissism?

Ask your students whether they think that media such as YouTube allows self-communication to be artistic, or merely narcissistic. Do they perceive a difference?

What do authors, artists, or explorers like The Man Who owe to their audience?

## Flashes

by Robert J. Sawyer  
Pages 213-231

“Flashes” originally appeared in *FutureShocks* (2006).

### Before Reading

#### The Mystery

Sawyer establishes in the first three paragraphs three important facts about the story: It is told in first person; the narrator is a detective; and he is investigating the latest of a series of suicides.

First person point-of-view is often used in detective and mystery fiction precisely because the narrator is on a journey of discovery, and the reader’s knowledge of events must be limited to exactly what the narrator knows and learns, and no more. Sawyer rarely uses first person in his fiction – he has done so notably in *Golden Fleece* (1990), in which an unreliable narrator conceals critical information from both the characters and the reader for reasons essential to the climactic revelation about the characters’ location and the extent to which they are in danger; and in *End of an Era* (1994), in which the protagonist learns what “really” led to the extinction of dinosaurs – and while many of his novels do use the structure of a mystery novel, he rarely employs a detective as protagonist or point-of-view character.

Keeping this in mind, consider as you read why Sawyer has chosen to use a police officer for his point-of-view character.

#### The History

Since the publication of *The War of the Worlds* (1898), by H. G. Wells, science fiction and film have been obsessed with the theme of human-alien encounters. Like Wells, many authors begin their stories from the standpoint that extraterrestrials will visit Earth and that they will not be benign.

Long lists have been compiled of stories (prose and cinematic) about military invasions of our planet, and it is unnecessary to indicate more than a few. A seminal novel by Jack Finney, *The Body Snatchers* (1955), has spawned many adaptations; likewise, “Who Goes There?” (1938), a novella by John W. Campbell, Jr., is better known by its filmed versions, Howard Hawks’s 1951 *The Thing from Another World* and John Carpenter’s 1982 *The Thing*.

Less common, because less dramatic, are stories in which alien visitors wish to help humanity, from Erich von Daniken’s nonfictional (and critically debunked) *Chariots of the Gods* (1970) to the sublime film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) to the ridiculous (but highly comedic) story “The Aliens Who Knew, I Mean, *Everything*,” by George Alec Effinger (1984).

Sawyer has written a great many works in which humans meet aliens and – in a common sub-theme of the alien invasion motif – the latter are mostly superior in technology, exoanthropology, and intelligence to humanity in every way. (His *Starplex* (1996) is an exception; a variety of galactic spacefaring beings, including humans and dolphins – with various sets of skills, strengths and weaknesses – work together on a spaceship toward a common goal yet, amusingly, theirs is hardly peaceful coexistence; they misunderstand each other, deceive each other, and spend quite a lot of time squabbling, maneuvering, and seeking the upper hand.)

#### The Dark Ages

The phrase “the Dark Ages” has been assigned to a historical period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance / Enlightenment era. The term refers both to the fact that it was a period during which historical writings fell by the wayside, suggesting widespread illiteracy, and also a period of which the Modern Age knows little (much as Africa was once known as the “Dark Continent,” meaning that little of the continent was known to European writers, travelers, and historians).

Consider while reading whether Sawyer’s future, which we might lightly refer to as the “New Age of Enlightenment,” might usher in a “New Dark Age,” in which humans will no longer explore and invent.

### Style Elements

Sawyer’s works are notable for the many literary devices he uses adjacent to the story itself: epigraphs, epilogues, maps, genealogical tables, diary extracts, and many more forms besides. In “Flashes,” the conspicuous device is what we may waggishly call the interlinear glossed text (IGT). When you encounter the first couple of glosses, you may find the language to be so impenetrable as to invite skipping over them. Their full significance is made clear as the story progresses.

The title has a possible variety of meanings. In the first paragraph, we are introduced to a gruesome scene spot-lit by “a bright light pulsing on and off.” In this dark story about information and re-education, lighting appears again, a few sentences later: “His noose was fashioned out of fiber-optic cabling, giving it a pearlescent sheen in the sunlight.”

The juxtaposition of “pulsing” and the fiber-optic cable (which may be used to transmit information via pulses of light) act as clues to foreshadow the literal flashes of light being beamed to Earth from an alien planet. It is entirely appropriate to refer to these also as “news flashes,” as what they contain is decidedly news-making.

As you read, watch for other clues Sawyer has to offer about light and dark, the visible and the invisible.

### **After Reading**

In light of the fact that the detective is concerned not with homicides, but with suicides whose motives are both understood and shared by the population of his city, in what way does a police investigation fit Sawyer’s story? Does he imply a metaphorical homicide, even a genocide, in which mental depression is the etiology of more than individual deaths, possibly the death of the human spirit?

Why does Sawyer choose to insert the interlinear glossed texts? Note that they have a structural purpose for the story: they serve to jump-cut from one scene to another, for example, from Marilyn tearfully regarding the body of her husband to a flashback regarding the narrator and his son.

Why does Sawyer inject these glosses into scenes of strong emotion? The first one follows the narrator’s internal thoughts (“I felt my stomach tightening, and I let out a sigh. My favorite thing: informing the spouse.”), the second follows the widow’s rage and grief (“Those aliens,” Marilyn said, closing her eyes. “Those God-damned aliens.”), and so on.

We might also ask why the glosses take the form of encyclopedia entries in dry scientific language, over which the reader might stumble, like a brick in the door, in the desire to keep reading about the unfolding human drama. A student not widely read in the sciences might suspect Sawyer of having invented the terminology, might even suspect Sawyer of playing a prank.

What are we to make of the first gloss, which champions the long-rejected theory of inheritance of acquired traits as described by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829), and which by implication dismisses our accepted view of Darwinian natural selection? Is Sawyer joking when his galactic encyclopedia proves the impossibility of life after death via such proofs as “hyper-parallactic phase-shift phenomenology”? If a musician (or all living musicians) within “Flashes” were to be told, from on high, that no truly sophisticated composition can be produced by a being with a lifespan of less than 1,100 Earth years, is suicide a logical reaction to the news?

How does “Flashes” compare with other stories of alien invasion? How is Sawyer commenting on those stories and their traditions? Is this invasion of information better or worse than a traditional invasion featuring spaceships and high-tech weapons?



Curiosity and invention are perhaps the highest of human attributes; the questioning mind will not cease in the quest for more and yet more information. How does Sawyer dramatize the adage “be careful what you wish for, lest it come true,” when his characters view this endless stream of incoming, verifiable and verified data as “poison from the sky”?

Finally, do you think the aliens’ intentions are benign in making “the Encyclopedia Galactica” freely available to all who have the resources to receive it? Do you think Sawyer believes so?

## **Veritas**

by **James Morrow**  
Pages 233-256

“Veritas” was originally published in the magazine *Synergy*, in 1987. It has been reprinted elsewhere, as in *The Science Fiction Century*, edited by David G. Hartwell (1997), and was later expanded into the short novel *City of Truth* (1991).

### **Before Reading**

#### Allegory

Of the nine stories collected in the anthology, “Veritas” has the least “contemporary” feel. It is, perhaps, most like “Think Like a Dinosaur” in its literally outlandish setting, whether futuristic (the story is unclear on that point) or resembling an alternate history.

“Veritas” should be read as a satire, an allegory, and (at times) a parody of earlier dystopian works. Modern allegory uses images and names to represent philosophical ideas and ideals. Your students should be familiar with such works as *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), *A Christmas Carol* (1843) by Charles Dickens (1812-1870), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) by C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), all classic allegories. As already stated, the story is rich with satirical and parodical elements, but as an exercise, consider how useful the allegorical form is for treating such topics as comparative social customs and Truth-versus-Fiction.

#### Dystopia

As in Morrow’s first novel, *The Wine of Violence* (1981), the author presents a seemingly nearly-perfect society. However, we learn on the first page that “Paradise will have its dissidents,” and the narrator, Orville Prawn, seems a cheerfully Orwellian villain, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he is working, like one of Big Brother’s operatives in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), to preserve the totalitarian society in which he lives by perpetuating propaganda and stamping out individualism. Other Orwellian themes include the nature of Truth, the use of surveillance, and a love affair that must remain secret.

#### Precision of Language

George Orwell famously prunes and bowdlerizes language in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and your students should be familiar with that book’s Ministry of Truth, the fictional language of Newspeak, and the ability to accept contradictory thoughts or beliefs known as Doublethink.

Orwell’s Ministry of Truth is, of course, the opposite of what its name claims to be. Prawn, who works for his society’s precisely named Overt Intelligence, has the job of finding “Dissemblers,” people who are able to lie. The dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is heavily reliant on its changes to the English language; the dystopia of “Veritas” lies in the society’s absolute compliance on telling the exact truth at all times, no matter how awkward this might be to politicians, family members, or those in pursuit of romance.

### **After Reading**

Morrow is, alongside Connie Willis, considered to be one of the funniest and wittiest writers in genre fiction today; he readily admits as influences such satirists as Mark Twain (1835-1910), Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1922-2007), and Jeremy Leven (1941- ). Did your students enjoy the extremes to which Morrow enforces truth-telling in conversation, store names, book titles, and advertisements? Have them volunteer moments or details they found particularly amusing.

Ask your students what they thought of the public dicta asserting, for example, “ART IS A LIE” or “PRIVACY IS A LIE.” Do they find some truth in such claims, or do they consider these merely to be more ways in which Morrow pushes his own Newspeak to the extremes?

Readers should discuss the extent to which they find the characters and society of Veritas to be credibly realistic as opposed to merely allegorical. When does Orville Prawn’s seduction of Sherry become more than just a job and turn into a courtship; is it a believable romance?

How do they react to creating a utopia by brainwashing or, as Morrow puts it more horrifically, by brain-burning?

In what ways can “Veritas” be read as an allegory of redemption?

## **A History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations**

by Kim Stanley Robinson

Pages 257-297

“A History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations” was originally published in Isaac Asimov’s *Science Fiction Magazine* (April, 1991) and later revised for Robinson’s collection *Remaking History* (1991). It has been multiply reprinted, as in *The Year’s Best Science Fiction: Ninth Annual Collection*, edited by Gardner Dozois (1992).

### **Before Reading**

#### Light and Dark

The motifs of light and darkness have long permeated fantasy fiction (as well as science fiction and horror), often serving as synonyms for Good and Evil. Lists of titles come easily to mind: J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), Lloyd Alexander’s Newbery Medal-winning *The Chronicles of Prydain* (1964-1968), Susan Cooper’s acclaimed *The Dark Is Rising Sequence* (1965-1977), Ursula K. Le Guin’s Hugo and Nebula Award-winning *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *Star Wars* (1977), and even *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003).

The themes of light and darkness are central to “A History of the 20th Century, With Illustrations,” as is demonstrated by the beginning of the first sentence: “Daily doses of bright light markedly improve the mood of people suffering from depression...” Here we are introduced to historian Frank Churchill, and his depression and craving for light mark both his geographical and his psychological journeys through the novella. Pay attention to each occurrence of the terms, their context, and Frank’s state of mind as he thinks about them. (Also consider why Robinson chose the surname Churchill for his protagonist; it is specifically joked about in the story.)

#### History and Historiography

Robinson’s story dwells at length on statistics of the war dead. Discuss with your students other works that deal with this concern, such as the Hugo Award-winning *Foundation Series* (1951-1953) by Isaac Asimov, Connie Willis’s Hugo- and Nebula Award-winning “Fire Watch” (1983), and the *Star Trek: The Original Series* episode “A Taste of Armageddon” (1969).

In Asimov’s series, a mathematician uses “psychohistory” to predict the behaviors of millions of people, including the waging of war, in order to shorten a Dark Age which he foresees following the end of a far-future galactic empire. Willis’s “Fire Watch” takes a more personal approach; her protagonist, a history student, is sent via time travel but unprepared to London during The Blitz – a several-month period in World War II during which bombs dropped by the German Luftwaffe murdered over 43,000 English civilians. When the student returns to school to complete his final exams, he is enraged by the test questions and shouts at his professor, “There aren’t any questions about the people. ... They are the history, not all these bloody numbers!” In “A Taste of Armageddon,” two warring planets do not fight a conventional war, but allow computers to execute wargames to determine how many dead would result from a given rain of bombs, and that number of citizens are then corralled and sentenced to die in “disintegration booths.”

Each of these works (and others, such as Joanna Russ’s “Souls” (1982) and Ward Moore’s 1953 novel *Bring the Jubilee*) treat war from a variety of perspectives. Be prepared to discuss with your students various theories of historiography / philosophy of history. Asimov’s psychohistory is founded on the certitude that human events are linearly cause-and-effect and teleological, and may have been influenced by Edward Gibbon (1737-1794). Other historians, such as Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), argued instead that history is cyclical and prone to the rise and decline of civilizations. Willis’s “Fire Watch” takes exception with “the Great Man theory” of history, promoted by Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), who wrote that “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.” The arguments of both Spengler and Carlyle might have been sources for “A Taste of Armageddon.” The powerless civilians are herded by their masters to their death, until the “Great Man,” one Captain James T. Kirk, decides how to end the cycle of ongoing xenophobia and war. And the protagonist of Robinson’s story, Frank Churchill, will consider yet another theory: “History as accident.”

Keep such theories in mind as you read; and watch how Frank, whose previous books on history have largely avoided periods of war time, gradually shifts from one theory to another.

### The Land of the Midnight Sun

Have your students learn some basic facts about Orkney, Scotland, and its antiquities, with emphasis on the Neolithic settlements.

#### **After Reading**

Discuss with your students the difference between dystopian and utopian fiction. In what ways does “A History of the 20th Century” flirt with dystopian themes such as misery, alienation, and mental oppression? How does Frank Churchill’s psychological journey progress from depression to optimism?

What is the immediate trigger for Churchill’s decision to leave London and travel “to the land of the midnight sun”? On first reading, does it seem an unusual choice to make? How does his encounter with *A History of the Nineteenth Century*, with Illustrations mark his mental improvement? Can his journey be considered a quest?

Are your students reminded of Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), in which she wrote (in English translation), shortly before being captured by Nazi soldiers, “Despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart”?

How does Frank’s tour of the Orkney Islands and its antiquities affect his thinking? As an exercise, have your students select five points at which Frank compares the ancient world with his modern times. Do your students understand why, thematically, it is crucial that Frank drive north in search of sunlight, rather than visiting a tropical climate?