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# The Best American Science Fiction And Fantasy 2016 (The Best American Series ®)



## Synopsis

From quiet, elegiac, contemporary tales to far-future, deep-space sagas, the stories chosen by series editor John Joseph Adams and guest editor Karen Joy Fowler for *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2016* demonstrate the vast spectrum of what science fiction and fantasy aims to illuminate, displaying the full gamut of the human experience, interrogating our hopes and our fearsâ "of not just what we can accomplish or destroy as a person, but what we can accomplish or destroy as a peopleâ "and throwing us into strange new worlds that can only be explored when we shed the shackles of reality. *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2016* includes Rachel Swirsky, Sofia Samatar, Charlie Jane Anders, Ted Chiang, Kelly Link, Maria Dahvana Headley, Kij Johnson, Catherynne M. Valente, Dexter Palmer and others. KAREN JOY FOWLER, guest editor, is the author of six novels and four short story collections, including *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. She is the winner of the 2014 PEN/Faulkner Award, a finalist for the Man Booker Prize, and has won numerous Nebula and World Fantasy awards. JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS, series editor, is the best-selling editor of more than two dozen anthologies, including *Brave New Worlds* and *Wastelands*. He is the editor and publisher of the digital magazines *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare* and is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, a new science fiction/fantasy novel imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

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## Customer Reviews

"A thoughtful array from a star-studded assemblage of writers. . . . [whose] subject matter travels

far and wide in time, space, and human memory." "Publishers Weekly" "Intellectually demanding. . . . A very elite, highly curated set of stories; an obvious taste is at work." "Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review" "A standout. The initial entry was a huge success, and 2016 editor Karen Joy Fowler brings a unique, refreshing perspective to this curated collection of the year's best sci-fi and fantasy short stories. Salman Rushdie, Charlie Jane Anders, Kelly Link, and Dexter Palmer lead a strong field of contributors who offer up some of modern genre's best writing and most intriguing ideas." "B&N SciFi & Fantasy Blog" "All in all, this second edition provides a comprehensive overview of the themes and tropes of science fiction and fantasy that continue to fascinate readers. . . . the impact of the stories more than makes up for its comparatively smaller package. Highly recommended, especially for those interested in the finest short stories the two genres produced over the past year, but missed reading them when originally published." "Bookgasm" "The second edition to the Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy, edited by Karen Joy Fowler (Mariner), is just as strong as the first, if not stronger. . . . With heavy-hitting authors such as Salman Rushdie, Anders and Sofia Samatar, this volume showcases the nuanced, playful, ever-expanding definitions of the genre and celebrates its current renaissance." "The Washington Post" "There has never been a better time in science fiction and fantasy short fiction, and you need look no further than this collection to see that truth. Within, you will find magic, aliens, dystopia, fairy tales, terrifying technology, far-flung futures, uncanny planets, and more. But you'll also find heartbreak, laughter, compassion, complex morality, acceptance, strength in numbers, love, justice, the absurd, and the bittersweet. Let this collection take you to lands uncharted, and lands unknown, and lands unseen" "you will be glad you went, and in these countries, there is something for everyone." "Tor.com

[banner] THE BEST AMERICAN SERIES From quiet, elegiac, contemporary tales to far-future, deep-space sagas, the stories chosen by series editor John Joseph Adams and guest editor Karen Joy Fowler for The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2016 demonstrate the vast spectrum of what science fiction and fantasy aims to illuminate, displaying the full gamut of the human experience, interrogating our hopes and our fears of not just what we can accomplish or destroy as a person, but what we can accomplish or destroy as a people and throwing us into strange new worlds that can only be explored when we shed the shackles of reality. The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2016 includes Salman Rushdie Sofia Samatar Charlie Jane Anders Ted Chiang Kelly Link Maria Dahvana Headley Adam Johnson Kij Johnson Catherynne M. Valente Dexter Palmer and others KAREN JOY FOWLER, guest editor, is the author of six novels and four short

story collections, including *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. She is the winner of the 2014 PEN/Faulkner Award, a finalist for the Man Booker Prize, and has won numerous Nebula and World Fantasy awards. JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS, series editor, is the best-selling editor of more than two dozen anthologies, including *Brave New Worlds* and *Wastelands*. He is the editor and publisher of the digital magazines *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare* and is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, a new science fiction/fantasy novel imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. "

This is an excellent collection of SFF stories that leans towards the literary end of the genre. Some stories still accomplish the more traditional SFF genre project of conducting a thought experiment or examining elements of current-day society by projecting them out into a fantastical world, and it's great to see those traditions of the genre alive and well here. However the voices and the topics they tackle are more diverse, and the writing and characterization are much stronger than in traditional genre work. If you're a literary reader who's curious about science fiction and fantasy, this is a great entry-point because the quality of the stories will make you feel right at home as you explore the genre elements. And, hey, it's got Salman Rushdie in it, and it's part of the venerable Best American publishing line, so there's more than enough lit cred to stave off the shame of buying a genre anthology. SFF readers will find plenty to love, and for them the quality of writing should just be a great bonus. This book ain't just Raymond Carver with literal aliens, or Isaac Asimov with better similes, it's at the cutting edge of the convergence between literature and genre writing.

I really didn't see much fantasy or sci-fi in these stories. Mostly it seemed they were literary short stories with some weirdness put in as almost an after thought. They just weren't what I was expecting.

Amazingly bizarre literary tales filled with mystery, fantasy, and science. This will make even the most devoted reader of "hard literature" take science fiction more seriously. Reminds me of why I was so enamored with sci-fi and fantasy as a child.

One of the best sci-fi anthologies I've had occasion to read - many new (to me) authors who I hope will grace us with more short work (and maybe a novel or two). And don't skip the two forewards - they're lovely essays on why we read and love science fiction and worth the price of the book on their own.

I chose to read this anthology because it contains new stories by Kij Johnson, Charlie Jane Anders, and Ted Chiang. These authors are consistently excellent in the short form, and their contributions here are no exception. The annual Best American SF&F series seems to select for literary-leaning stories. A few are in fact pure literary stories with perhaps a single speculative convention—“a mythological figure, narration from the beyond the grave, or a videogame slightly more advanced than today’s technology allows. I found seven stories to be excellent, four I disliked, and the rest fell somewhere in the bell curve of average. Most are worth reading, but I am not sure they are reflective of the genre as a whole. It is strange that a best-of-the-year collection like this does not include a single short story nominated for either of the field’s most prestigious awards, the Hugo or the Nebula.

THE FANTASY STORIES—“Meet Me in Iram” by Sofia Samatar

“A woman has visions of the lost city of Iram, mentioned in the Qajar Iran, and fills it with visions of her family. A disjointed and barely coherent dream-story. Interesting Facts by Adam Johnson

“An unflinching story of a mother battling breast cancer from the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Orphan Master’s Son*. Sad and moving, but too melodramatic. I would not label this a fantasy story, even though there is a very small supernatural element.

The Apartment Dweller—“Bestiary” by Kij Johnson

“Each fictional animal is juxtaposed to its human owner to highlight an array of broken relationships and fractured desires. A skilled and reflective piece of writing.

The Mushroom Queen by Liz Ziemska

“A woman’s life is taken over by the Mushroom Queen in this urban fantasy. The purpose of this story seems to be to show off how much the author knows about fungi, but I have trouble endorsing any story that is partially narrated by a pet dog.

Tea Time by Rachel Swirsky

“Continues the story of the Mad Hatter and White Rabbit after Alice leaves Wonderland. Written as an inventive, if overly bawdy, homage/pastiche of Lewis Carroll’s style.

The Duniaza—“The” by Salman Rushdie

“The medieval philosopher Ibn Rushd is banished from the Arab Spanish court for his teachings that logic, science, and reason rule the universe, not the mystical will of Allah. He is comforted (ironically enough) by a jiniri (female genie) who bears him many children. His descendants travel the world through successive centuries spreading a belief in secularism over religion. The story posits whether Ibn himself would be proud of this because despite his philosophy he remained a believing Muslim. Funny, insightful, and thought-provoking, this short story later became the basis of the novel *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*.

The Thirteen Mercies by Maria Dahvana Headley

“A platoon of special ops soldiers exiled to a jungle planet use dark magic to fight a mysterious enemy. Think the Predator meets Voldemort. The system of magic is based on reversals of the 13 Jewish attributes of mercy. Slowness to Anger is reversed to Swift and Killing Rage. Mercy

Before the Sin is reversed to Punishment Before the Sin is Committed. It is a great concept, even if the murky ending falls flat. *Things You Can Buy for a Penny* by Will Kaufman – A horror fable about a group of characters who summon the Wet Gentlemen from the bottom of a well, who will grant wishes for a penny. Not really SF/F but a fun story nonetheless. *The Heat of Us: Notes Toward an Oral History* by Sam J. Miller – A superb tale that revisits the 1969 Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village with the premise that perhaps it was the result of pyrokinesis. A well-written examination of the start of the gay rights movement and the larger question of the behaviors and attitudes that trigger harassment and aggression. *Ambiguity Machines: An Examination* by Vandana Singh – A triptych of interconnected vignettes about machines that blur the lines of time and reality. **THE SCIENCE FICTION STORIES**  
*The Game of Smash and Recovery* by Kelly Link – A young girl is raised by an artificial lifeform above a strange planet filled with vampire-like creatures. When the girl reaches maturity, she realizes she is actually a passenger on a spaceship who was awakened because the ship malfunctioned and she carries a backup program to restart it. The author pulls off a neat literary trick – shifting the point of view from the confused girl to the consciousness of the ship’s AI. However, there are too many unanswered questions (What are the vampires?) and plot holes (Why wake a child passenger rather than a trained crew member? If the crew members are dead, why not at least wake an adult passenger better equipped to live a solitary life aboard the ship?)  
*Planet Lion* by Catherynne M. Valente – This story begins at the intersection of three ideas: 1) Alien animals become sentient when they come in contact with a technology they do not understand, 2) Humans develop the tech to mimic evolution, creating life from sludge and then imprinting that lifeform with the knowledge and memories of a human being, 3) An interstellar colonization war. The story is complex enough, and the author unwisely holds back key information to the end, making it more confusing than it needs to be.  
*By Degrees and Dilatory Time* by S.L. Huang – A man with eye cancer receives implants and struggles with the implications of voluntary and involuntary biotech enhancements.  
*The Daydreamer* by Proxy by Dexter Palmer – Greeneertech offers its employees the promise of boosting productivity and furthering their careers if they will implant a genetically-engineered parasite into their nervous system which will rob them of their imaginations and their libidos. Alarming side effects will (and do!) occur.  
*Headshot* by Julian Mortimer Smith – A near-future satire where citizens track U.S. soldiers online and must approve all enemy engagement by democratic vote. According to the author’s endnote, it began as a hopeful story which imagined how war could be avoided if the average person could not turn away from its horrors. However, it morphed into a biting examination of social media and the dangers of impeding military operations with restrictive rules of

engagement.No Placeholder for You, My Love by Nick Wolven—“People drift through an ever-changing artificial environment trying to find a love match, aware that doing so means death. It is hard to discuss this story without giving away too many innovative plot twists, but this is a well-crafted tale about aging, online dating, artificial intelligence, and the impossibility of finding a true soulmate.Lightning Jack—“A former Nascar driver turns vigilante gasoline pirate in a post-apocalyptic America. Features a rogues gallery of characters and some magnetic action sequences. Well-written, even if it is strongly reminiscent of other works like Mad Max, “Pilots” by Joe R. Lansdale, and “The Night We Buried Road Dog” by Jack Cady.Rat Catcher—“A woman watches as her life partner becomes disabled by dementia (a fictional disease named Rat Catcher—“Yellow) and can only maintain contact with others through an advanced online role playing game. This is a very effective story with a thoughtful message about technology as an enabler for the seriously ill.Three Bodies at Mitanni by Seth Dickinson—“A team of three scientists, one of them a gender-shifting androgynous, must sit in judgement over interplanetary civilizations that have evolved from human colonies to determine if any have become too alien and pose a threat to mankind—“s existence. The character dynamics are nuanced, and the story features two strong philosophical-moral dilemmas—“Is it ever justified to commit genocide in self-defense? How do you define, measure, and detect the essence of what it means to be human?The Great Silence by Ted Chiang—“Chiang stuffs a 4-page short story with more thought-provoking ideas and worldview-bending concepts than any other author. Explores the biology of parrots, man—“s quest to find intelligent alien life, and the role of sound and voice in religious mythology. One of the best short stories of 2016 in any genre.

Some of the stories in this book are REALLY good and others - ugh, nearly awful. But I would say for the most part most of the stories are very creative, inventive, new, interesting and well written. There is quite a bit of variety in the plots - everything from the bizarre (a woman whose child is a cube) to vampires living in Hawaii. Overall, I would recommend but there are a couple of crap stories that I read but wished I had just skipped.

I'm not often into short stories, but since this was recommended by John Scalzi (and it was on sale!), I gave it a shot. I'll admit, there were several stories that I barely started before giving up on them and flipping past to the next. Some were too hard to follow or too boring. Some were anywhere from okay to pretty darn good. The list below is the set that I feel were standouts, reasons

to read this book: stories that drew me in, that dealt gut punches, and that were haunting in their own ways.- Interesting Facts- The Mushroom Queen- Things You Can Buy For A Penny- Rat Catcher's YellowIf you're a fan of short stories, you'll probably love this collection. (I prefer long form for its opportunities to dive deeper into stories and characters.) For those who are on the fence about a short story anthology, pick this up when it's on a sale and pay attention to the four stories above. They'll stay with you--as any good story should.

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