

Joshua Cohen

Nine Recursive Scifi Stories

1.

Once upon a time a machine was invented to invent every possible scifi story. It made stories of space opera, space western, interspecies romance, time travel, parallel universe, cyberpunk, steampunk, utopia, dystopia, apocalypse noir, etc. It created literally billions of stories. This story you are reading now is #45,059,534,455.

2.

Scifi writers, at their annual convention in Newark, decide to takeover Hollywood by writing nothing original anymore, but by merely novelizing movies with great accuracy: describing setting, transcribing dialogue. For years no new scifi is written, while the only scifi that gets published remakes recent movies in prose. Gradually filmmakers

forget this fact, and begin remaking scifi into movies again: remakes of remakes, remakes of remakes of remakes. This will continue until filmmakers forget about literature entirely. Gradually.

3.

A boy reads a scifi story in a book but the book, being old and maltreated, is missing pages, specifically the story's last three pages, and so while the boy is under the impression that the story he's reading has ended, really the ending has been missed. In the last three pages the hero who the boy thinks has died is revealed as actually being alive, and his death nothing but an alternate destiny. The story, then, has something of a trick ending. Too many scifi stories have trick endings....

Years later the boy's on a date. This is the first date he's been on in months and he's nervous. The girl, similarly dateless of late, is nervous, too. Over dinner they begin talking about movies, which leads to booktalk and, after they're comfortable with one another and a smidgen drunk, their geekiness blooms as they discuss scifi. The girl mentions a story familiar to the boy and proceeds to detail its plot. The boy stops her eagerly, fills in much of the rest, then adds, "I thought it was so sudden, though, that he died."

She says, "He didn't die, that's the point, he was alive the whole time."

He says, "That's not how I remember it."

And the girl, who until now had been entertaining great prospects with this boy, frowns, thinking anyone who can't remember an ending isn't worth beginning with.

4.

Someone writes a scifi story that features a character called Nul. A movie's made, and is called *Nul*. Duly, Nul apparel appears in stores, Nul lunchboxes and actionfigures, a Nul videogame. Then, the civilization crumbles (this, of course, is the funnest aspect of scifi, just saying that, just doing that—*crumbling*).

A million years later the alien equivalent of archaeologists discovers a lost planet that worshipped a god called Nul, and brings this cult of Nul back to the homegalaxy where its objects are venerated if not religiously then for reasons of historical respect; until, that is, a subsequent research team manages to translate what are known as “intellectual property laws,” and the alien intelligentsia, previously the most ardent servant of Nul, becomes suddenly ambivalent.

5.

A young writer of scifi outlines an elaborate story that serves as a political allegory. Alien People A are very poor and oppressed by Alien People B. The writer, who is a liberal like all young writers, obviously sympathizes with People A. The book is a smash hit, and he spends the rest of his life writing sequels. But, over the years, as he gets richer and tired, more old and conservative, he finds he agrees more with People B, and begins to suspect that People A are responsible, to some degree, for their own poverty and ignorance.

However, this sense also passes, and at the very end of his life the allegory has been forgotten entirely as the writer grinds out books describing only kidnappings, rapes, and murder, in an unending war between two mutually incomprehensible selves.

6.

A man who produced scifi comicbooks was a rarity for his day: he both wrote the words and drew the pictures. One day, the day his wife left him for drinking too much and smoking marijuana and sleeping with the redhead down on the third floor, he developed a terrible problem. Everywhere he walked a bubble would follow: a thoughtbubble; and in it people could read each of his thoughts floating just above his head. When the redhead left him a month later for an assistant harpist with the San Francisco Symphony, the thoughtbubble, which had been connected to his head by sundry puffs, became connected to his mouth by a wisp, and turned into a speechbubble, which meant that now everything he said could be heard everywhere, as if he were

speaking from the clouds. Some people had begun to think he was a god, but the women in his neighborhood knew he was just an egomaniac who kept odd hours, drew dirty pictures, and never washed his pants.

7.

Once an elderly scifi writer was solicited by the new young editor of the last scifi magazine to appear in print and, in response, submitted a story that involved squid—he thought it was a squid. But then when the magazine finally printed the story—two years later in the last issue of any scifi mag to ever appear—and he received his single complimentary copy at the Westchester assisted living facility he'd just been moved into by his daughter following his second stroke, he found that every instance of the word “squid” had been changed to “pickup truck” (though once it was just “pickup”). Other than that, the story appeared unchanged—not even copyedited, all its typos intact.

The writer spent the last two years of his decline wondering how all his squids had become trucks, and tried his hand at various fictional explanations (*squid* meant *truck* in an alien dialect into which his story had been translated before being translated back into English by the alien editors of a periodical that was, in truth, to serve as an alien constitution, and so on—because the aliens had lost the original manuscript and had to work hurriedly); all of which attempts were failures, though his daughter, who typed every single one of these stories from his shaky handwriting on napkins, would never have admitted that to Dad.

8.

Once, a literary genre was invented to relieve the psychic pressure brought to bear on human life by mechanization, and the encroachments of technology. But once that technology overtook life, and life became just one more form of mechanization, there was no more need for this genre. What formerly had been fiction now was fact, and that was perhaps the strangest story conceivable.

9.

There once was an inventor who invented a machine to invent, and categorize, every possible scifi story. His machine made stories of space opera, space western, interspecies romance, time travel, parallel universe, cyberpunk, steampunk, utopia, dystopia, apocalypse noir, etc. It created literally billions of stories. This story you're reading now is from category #45,059,534,456.

The writer of the above story sat back in his chair, well satisfied. His happiness lasted until he realized he could not think of a single magazine left that would publish him.

*Joshua Cohen most recent novel is **Witz** (Dalkey Archive). He lives in Brooklyn, NY.*