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# The IMSA-SF Paradigm: Why it's All The Same to Me

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### The IMSA-SF Paradigm: Why it's All The Same to Me

On what must have been my third or fourth day of IMSA, I remember an upperclassman asking me, “You’ve read *Ender’s Game*, right? You have to read that book—everyone at IMSA does.” I had, in fact, read the book, and I immediately felt relieved. I felt had passed my first test at IMSA, plus I was geeked to learn that my taste in books wasn’t out of place here. I shouldn’t have been so surprised. IMSA is overflowing with science fiction fans of all varieties—we are a nerd school after all, even if the Admissions Office disapproves of my terminology. But reading David Hartwell’s “The Golden Age of Science Fiction is Twelve” has made me realize that IMSA’s association with science fiction runs even more deeply—IMSA *is* science fiction, or at least the reality TV show version of it. The main effects of science fiction upon its readers—to isolate readers from normal society, to introduce scientific ways of thinking, and to influence the way readers see the rest of the world—are, in my opinion, identical to the main effects IMSA has upon its student.

In his article, David Hartwell frequently references the “barriers” that SF readers put between themselves and the rest of the world, stating that, “the SF world only wants insiders behind the scenes” (271). In some ways IMSA constructs many of the same barriers, functionally, if not purposefully. Many students come to IMSA as an escape from their old schools—because they do not fit in there, they hope to find in IMSA a place where they can belong. What they find, often, is not only a haven, but a gated community, a subculture that is incomprehensible to those not “in the know.” Even more than the confusing acronyms and quirky traditions that baffle visitors at every turn, the holistic experience of living at IMSA seems like it would be hard for outsiders

to really understand. I know that when I go home, I often find it nearly impossible to explain things like ten check, study hours, and internet shut-off to my friends. To attempt to convey the more nebulous aspects of IMSA would be like trying to convey the existence of the fourth dimension. Science fiction shares this same incomprehensibility to outsiders, as demonstrated by Samuel Delany in his experiments with nonplussed literature professors, but even more, science fiction “does not want an audience...who won’t take time to learn the rules and conventions of the game” (Hartwell 271). This impatience, of sorts, provides an obstacle for non-SF readers to enter the SF realm, just as we IMSAians often experience frustration with people outside of the IMSA bubble. IMSA and SF offer the same things to those that they serve—protection and isolation from the scary and ignorant outside world.

Similarly, both IMSA and SF present their members with introductory common experiences that provide much-needed knowledge. During my stint as an Excel tutor, “What *is* MSI, anyway?” was one of queries I most commonly fielded. I always had some trouble with the question, but I usually told the students that MSI is how we learn how to learn science. In my opinion, MSI is a vital part of the IMSA experience because it provides a baseline, a vocabulary list of sorts, for how to go about doing science and conducting research. Without that preliminary knowledge, understanding the rest of IMSA science, at least, becomes very difficult. In the same way, science fiction requires “a process of SF education and familiarization” (Hartwell 270) before a potential reader can really be drawn into the SF fold. In the case of both IMSA and SF, an introduction is needed because of the demands that both require upon the thought processes of their acolytes. As IMSA’s SSL II.A says, “Students move from a naive to a more sophisticated perception of meaning,” (“Learning Standards SSLs”) by adopting a scientifically based mindset from which to understand the world. Science fiction is much the same in that in

order to ask its basic question of “What if?” readers must have a basic understanding of scientific principles and use these principles to gain in their understanding of the world of whatever work they enter. Without a working knowledge of science and its precepts, neither IMSA nor SF could be successful.

IMSA’s SSL II, Thinking About Thinking, includes the following explanation, “Students must recognize the filters that shape their conceptions... of the world. These filters...limit intellectual understanding and exploration. When aware of these constraints, students are able to examine their world from multiple perspectives...” (“Learning Standards SSLs”). Essentially, we as IMSA students are being asked to remove the preconceptions and prejudices that we hold and open our mind to new ways of thinking. Because of IMSA’s incredibly diverse and unique environment, we students are often forced to rethink long-held beliefs. With that in mind, Hartwell’s assertion that SF, “is profound in the opportunities it offers the reader to challenge his most basic assumptions...” (283) sounds eerily familiar. And when Samuel R. Delany, in his article “Some Presumptuous Approaches to Science Fiction,” states that, “science fiction poises in a tense dialogic, agonistic relation to the given,” (291) my mind immediately jumps to the frequent arguments I engage in with my peers in which we constantly question societal conventions and political constructions. SF fans are the same way in that “the science-person never agrees with anybody else in conversation just to be friendly“ (Hartwell 281). These arguments that spring from this mindset force us to rethink our ideas. They are encouraged and enflamed at IMSA but at any other school would probably be quashed. Just today, for example, I had a conversation with Dr. Skinner and Dr. Smith in which we discussed possible motives behind the New Deal. By the end of it my opinion of Franklin Roosevelt had shifted completely. IMSA refuses to allow complacency and encourages constant shifting of perspective, and in its

presentation of new worlds, moral quandaries, and mind-boggling technologies, science fiction does the exact same things.

In my opinion, the idea that IMSA serves the exact same purpose as SF is a fascinating one. Although we may not want to admit it, I think that IMSA teenagers, on the whole, are extremely similar to the teenagers so maligned by Hartwell, and not just because IMSA tends to attract SF fans. Instead, it is the very nature of IMSA that makes IMSA teenagers resemble the strange, immature SF fans described by Hartwell. By educating teenagers in a science-based view of the world, erecting barriers for both protection and isolation, and causing dramatic changes in the perspectives of their participants, both SF and IMSA produce teenagers who are analytic, skeptical, excited about technology, and active participants with the world that surrounds them.

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