Bugs, Buffy and Santa's Giant Sack: Using Speculative Fiction in the English Classroom
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Before I begin, I should tell you who I am. If anyone came here thinking they'll find some great international pedagogist who's spent months researching thousands of papers and summarised it for his PhD and is sharing the results of reams of footnotes with you sorry. I am instead a teacher of 11 years experience, a geek of 17 years experience, and a nerd before that for about 14 years. So no academic credentials whatsoever.

But at least it's not one of those talks which is simply a thinly veiled attempt for someone to sell a book. The books I won't be trying to sell you that I contributed to are the brilliant *Buffy in the Classroom Essays on teaching with the Vampire Slayer*, available from the interwebs, and the spec fic anthology for 9-12 year olds, *Worlds Next Door*, which comes with a support website for teachers. I won't be promoting these through the speech. Even though I totally should.

This talk is called "Bugs, Buffy and Santa's Giant Sack: Using Speculative Fiction in the English Classroom". Yes the Bugs of the title refers to that Bug there. So a quick apology if you expected me to rabbit on about Bugs Bunny.

Let's begin with defining what speculative fiction or spec fic is. Spec fic is essentially the catch all phrase for the in-bred cousins of the literary genre family: science fiction, fantasy and horror. It's labelled speculative fiction, because more so than any other genre, these genres speculate on the question "what if?"

What if a killer can attack you in your sleep?
What if there was a world where magic existed?
What if we as a species keep going the way we are?

Speculative fiction is the fiction of warnings. It examines problems in today's day and age in a setting that removes it from the apathy that comes from putting it in a familiar setting, thus avoiding the narrative from becoming a simple didactic lecture that can be easily ignored. For example, you watch a real film about a real event like *Dances With Wolves*, and be disgusted at the US displacement of Amerindians in the somethingth century, a situation that's long gone for most. Or we can watch essentially the same story set in the future with blue people, and now we're being disgusted by humankind's willingness to exploit native peoples for greed.

By using a speculative fiction text in the English area it also becomes easier to teach students English concepts such as allegory, symbolism, representation than in a contemporary text – a contemporary text by the way is becomes quickly outdated – a contemporary text where students get stuck on simply retelling the plot. They can't get past what's familiar to examined the construction of the text, the delivery of themes, values and attitudes. But in a spec fic plot, students can't simply relay plot to deliver those lessons about life. Students have to be able to apply symbolism and representation to get at those grand themes. And truly, it's not that hard. It's something the students have been doing since they were kids. Red Riding Hood, Three Little Pigs, Hare and the Tortoise. Any simplistic fairy tale with a non-human protagonist. Like anything starring Adam Sandler. All we need to do is remind the students of a skill they've long had.

What's more with spec fic, you remove the bounds of physics and creativity takes over. Now I realise that this isn't really spec fic, but I think this point has been proven by my next research topic: responding to the call to arms that this line of thinking opens up, I redesigned several year 9 tasks, removing the tasks from reality. The persuasive essay went from being an essay about a topic that affects their local society, to an essay that endorsed cannibalism. When it came to the advertising task? No longer did they have to sell anything that's already on sale: they had to sell koala meat. The Year 9 rhetorical speech went from being about a topic they felt strongly about to having to argue for issues from The world is flat, and houses should be made of glass, to Paris Hilton is a great rolemodel and the universe is controlled by a giant slinky that we should all worship. And when they discovered they couldn't rely on the familiar, they concentrated on the text itself and produced some great work.

The same goes with spec fic. The familiar's removed so they look at the construction more closely.

Which in no way leads me to my next point. Spec fic texts are just better. I know that relative qualities of all texts are subjective at best, but as an expert, trust me: they're better.

Think about it:
Science fiction involves grabbing a feature of contemporary times and taking its qualities to a ridiculous level. Essentially this is satire, but instead of using it as a comedic device, science fiction authors are able to ground the impossible in reality.

Fantasy accomplishes the seemingly most impossible of tasks: creating entire worlds we know could not possibly exist and making audiences believe in them.

And horror. A genre where the author reaches deep into the heart of the audience to play with that one emotion the audience member has fought their entire lives to suppress – fear. And the audience allows them to do it.

How can proper Literature compete with this? It doesn't. Now I know that some teachers will say that this stuff is already used all the time. But that's not entirely true. Most primary school teachers will occasionally use CS Lewis, maybe a little Enid Blyton in the early years. And I had the luck to have a Year 7 teacher who taught me *The Hobbit*. Then we get into high school and maybe an enlightened teacher will give into popularity and teach one of the Harry Potter books. But that's about it. Spec fic is not considered serious enough.

But.

I found myself teaching the very restrictive WA Lit course which has a prescribed reading list. My idea was to provide a course that gave the students an introduction to the history of Western Literature and as I was choosing the texts, I discovered something truly awesome.

I began with Greek Lit, and *Medea* – a story about a witch who kills a princess with a cursed crown and cloak – two items from the dungeons and dragons Dungeon Master's Guide, Magic Item list – and then escapes in a flying chariot given to her by her grandfather, the sun god.

The only decent Old English text was *Beowulf*, a poem where a barbarian tears the arms off one monster, kills the monster's mum with a magic sword then dies while killing a friggin dragon!

Middle English brings us the *Canterbury Tales*, which has the Pardoner's Tale where three drunks try to hunt down Death himself.

Elizabethan era brings us Shakespeare – half of his works can be classified as fantasy or horror.

Romantic poetry gives us Keats, one of my favourite poems of his, La Belle Dame sans Merci, a short poem about a faery sucking the life out of a knight.

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley gives us the seminal mad scientist who reanimates a collection of corpse parts, which resorts to murdering in an attempt to fill its empty soul. Or in other words: it's a friggin' zombie!

I was going to do *Great Expectations* by Dickens but someone told me it was too long a text to fit with all the rest I was doing, so I swapped it for another great Victorian era text: *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Spec fic is not just *as good as* proper literature, it *is* literature so I really don't understand the reticence of many people to teach it.

And so, if you accept the premise that these are the types of texts we can teach, I'd like to share some I've used in the past with upper school, not as simple lead ins to "better texts" but as major texts.

Starship Troopers. The basis of one third of my title. I love teaching this text, and it's not because of the graphic over the top violence. And it's not because of the sci-fi aspect of it. It's not even because it contains possibly the greatest line of dialogue ever committed to celluloid.

No it's because it demonstrates better than any "proper" "issue" film some of the most complex ideas inherent in English.

Here's a theory. English isn't an easy subject to define. Every time someone tries to, they're confronted by subjectivity, ill-defined concepts and politics. But in WA at least I have a theory as to what it is or at least should be.

English is about language. Essentially. But that overly simplistic statement gets complicated by how it's taught. We can (or at least I have) split this into 3 areas: Texts – we look at the way language has been used by experts, and teach students the tools they need to do the same.
The effects of language in its many permutations.
And meta language – that is the language about language – grammar rules, spelling, etymology.

The most difficult of these to grasp is effects. Because in these effects, are some of the hardest concepts students need to learn. When discussing the effects writers have, you have to teach them to be critically literate, making assumptions about the motivations of the author of the text, based on their values, and the themes inherent in the text. But part of that is the acknowledgement that two people can read the same text and come away with two different interpretations, and yet both can still be considered correct.

Because students are so familiar with visual language – or at least visual texts – the intricacies of the texts' constructions can be skipped, and the effects can be more thoroughly explored and explained.

But why do I recommend a spec fic text, especially one so ostensibly trashy?

The mistake many teachers make is to choose a film with a theme – or worse – a subject almost identical to the novel they've studied. And so there's no intellectual effort required on the part of the students to see the theme or even values. You've essentially given the students the answer to a test before the subject's been taught. And often then this is reinforced buy having the students study a text which overtly deals with the issue in its plot. You're not only handing the answer over to the students, you're telling them the answer is in the plot and not the construction of the film itself.

You do that with a film like *Starship Troopers* you're on a hiding to nowhere. Which is kinda the point. *Starship Troopers* is a completely over the top space opera. With big Americans. With big guns. Against even bigger bugs. But this film is so much more than that. If you pay attention, you'll see that there are so many different readings possible. From the many readings possible each student is given two to support, and told to find evidence in the structure, plot and context that will support their readings. And the beauty of this text is that there are so many possible and so much to examine. There's the whipping scene– a black man whipping the blonde-haired, blue eyed boy, under the guise of 'administrative punishment'. The constant news flashes – simple source of lazy exposition, sure, but they also neatly separate the three acts of the film while beautifully echoing the propaganda newsreels of World War II. The film's setting even warrants discussion. The heroes come from South America, yet everyone clearly speaks English with US accents. Is this simply a throwback to B-Grade sci-fi films of the 50s when the future seems to contain nothing but Mid-West bred quarter backs and girl next doors with centrefold breasts? Or is it a reference to director Verhoeven's fear of a future Pax Americana, Manifest Destiny run rampant? And what about the casting? The cast is made up primarily of ex-models and ex-child stars – not one (with the possible exception of Verhoeven regular Michael Ironside) could out-act William Shatner on a good day. Is it unintentional casting, the production unable to afford decent actors? Or is the casting entirely intentional – a statement on the vacuity of appearance-obsessed US society? Whichever, the appearance of Doogie Howser MD himself in an officer's uniform scarily reminiscent of the Gestapo is jolting – perhaps more so now that Neil Patrick Harris has recently come out of the closet. Or maybe not. Many critics have attacked the film for promoting fascistic philosophies almost primarily because of this scene. In his commentary – a feature invented primarily for English teachers if ever there was one – Verhoeven defends himself by saying it's simply evidence of the film's theme: war turns everyone into fascists: including Doogie Howser MD. Other critics point towards the source novel as evidence of Verhoeven's fascist values. After all, the original 1961 novel by Robert Heinlein *is* a fascist text. It is little more than a extreme right-wing manifesto that advocates amongst other things, the limitation of suffrage to military veterans, breeding licences for humans and the public flogging of juvenile delinquents. But at least it's five times more interesting than Heinlein's other classic *Stranger in a Strange Land* simply because it's five times shorter.

But what *Starship Troopers* ended up doing was to criticise US society and foreign policy while almost everybody involved seemed to miss it entirely.

Which leads into an important point about spec fic texts – but in particularly films – which is often overlooked in the scorn heaped upon them. Mainstream films – those produced and mass-marketed by the film industry – necessity and economics, dictate that they be conservative. They literally cannot afford to do anything but pander t the values of the majority or dominant sections of the audience. It's left to the spec fic texts, often relegated to the classification of "B-Grade" to push the boundaries. The first tv inter-racial kiss was between Captain Kirk and Lt Uhura on *Star Trek*. The first feature film interracial instance of getting it on, involved Charlton Heston in *The Omega Man*.

It's as if the makers of these films realise they have nothing to lose and so go for broke
As much as I love this film, it's the horror genre I love most of all. *Nightmare on Elm Street* was my Miranda from The Tempest's Brave New World moment. I had seen *Nightmare on Elm Street 2* at a slumber party when I was eleven and it scared all of the 48 shades of brown out of me. I saw it again recently and I have to say: it's awful. But when I finally got around to seeing the first one a number of years later, I was able to see the craftsmanship that went into shaping a horror film. For a writer, and then a director, to develop an idea which essentially is entirely illogical and unrealistic, yet be able to hold on to an audience, making them willing to have the director reach into their primeval being and tweak the most primitive of emotions – their fear of an unknown boogeyman. This was incredible to me. I started watching and – strangely enjoying – horror religiously after that.

And so when a tv show came along that promised me weekly dose of horror, I was there.

Now I'm not going to defend my love of this television show. And I'm not going to go into great detail about why it should be used as a text for serious study, after all there have been myriad books written about the linguistics, philosophies and fashions in the series that I don't need to add anything, like this one: That actually goes into the many ways you can use *Buffy* on both high school and college, with everything from English (obviously) to legal morality. Believe it or not there are plenty of universities around the world that offer courses in *Buffy* studies. And a couple of the most literate websites you're ever likely to see devoted to a show about vampires and the slaying thereof you're ever likely to experience. In the aforementioned book that I'm not plugging, there is a chapter that deals with three episodes that I highly recommend in particular.

"Beauty and the Beasts": It is one of the best demonstrations of how *Buffy* subverted stereotypical gender roles, switching stereotypes into new archetypes. It's a great tale that argues that all men have a beast in them, some just try to fight it. It's also an analogy for alcohol abuse and domestic violence. this episode contains intertextual links with *Call of the Wild* – my favourite dog-based novel of the 20th century.

"Ginger bread": a great allegorical tale of mass hysteria and rabid media reaction with Hansel and Gretel as the bad guys of the episode. It demonstrates the perfect trait of *Buffy*, turning the metaphorical literal: the town's witch-hunt of those different to themselves becomes a literal one complete with a burning at the stake.

And "Hush": a beautifully created demonstration of what television could and should be. Joss Whedon, creator and main writer of *Buffy* was known for his dialogue, so to challenge himself he decided to write an episode during which the characters couldn't speak for three quarters of it. Using intertextual allusions without being clichéd, it became not just one of the funniest episodes of the season, but one of the spookiest hours of television ever produced.

Finally the last I want to talk about is one I'm not entirely sure about.

But before I do that, I want to talk about Tehani Wessely. Tehani Wessely is the teacher/librarian at our school. She's also on the board of the Western Australian Library Association. Right now she's running the Swancon – the Western Australian annual geek fest. She runs her own small publishing press. She's a judge on the WA Premier Book awards. She runs her own spec fic website, where she has interviewed some of the biggest names in spec fic. And most of these jobs she did while raising three shockingly well-adjusted kids. While her husband has been away working at the mines. On maternity leave. She was; not her husband.

So it's safe to say like most people who meets a super achieving success story like her, I hate her guts. But she looked like a woman who knew how to get things done. SO I pretended to like her and eventually:

She was also editor of a literary magazine and two years ago I was published: the first time I was, therefore living the dream of 90% of all male English teachers.

A simple horror tale. Involving a tattooed gentleman and a character who's essentially. Roald Dahl's Man from the South's cousin.

And last year when Tehani produced her first book, I submitted a story and the story was accepted. The anthology was called *Worlds Next Door* and it contains a series of spec fic stories that range from the sci fi tale of the best dog in the universe, to a fantasy tale where a book store is the most magical place of all.

Tehani saw a gap in marketing. No spec fic short stories were really being produced for the 11-14 market. And so she filled it. In addition, she set up a website full of tasks specific for each of the stories. They really worked well, especially since the stories were written with those students in mind.

Except for mine.

My contribution, "Old Saint Nick", is a tale that one reviewer called – to my eternal pride – too creepy for kids.

It is a tale of a boy genius whose knowledge of electronics, quantum physics and pop mythology allows him to catch Santa Claus in the act of delivering presents. Unfortunately for the boy genius he doesn't anticipate the reality behind the myth.

Now I don't bring all this up to tell you how much you should buy the book and use it in your classes (even though I totally should); I'm not even saying this despite appearances to the contrary – to talk myself up. But I bring it up because of the quandary I experienced because of it.

English is more difficult to teach than other subjects for a number of reasons. There's no clear answers, multiple choice tests are pretty much non-existent, but most pertinently for this speech – it's difficult for us to demonstrate our skills to the students. Maths students can watch their teachers can solve problems on the board. D&T students can see their D&T teachers build spice racks or in one awesome case – a light plane. And Chemistry students can see their teachers blow shit up.

Seemingly every area of teaching, the teacher can truly demonstrate their mastery of the subject except English.

Sure modelling works, and it works well when we're teaching a text type that they're unfamiliar with, like reports, essays and letters. But a great deal of our job is teaching students to analyse fiction texts. How does modelling truly help with that: after all, there's only so many times you can answer questions like: "what if the author didn't mean that?" "Aren't you reading too much into the story" and "And how do you know they did that because of that?" before you start doubting your own answers. So obviously a different tact has to be taken.

A few years ago, I discovered a particular short story on our school's photocopier. Like all teachers, I was always looking for new resources to steal and claim as my own, so I picked it up and read it. And my gawd was it awful. Terrible plotting, shallow characterisation, and pedestrian diction all wrapped up in a story that had a moral so childish my 4 year old would dismiss it as being beneath her. Who was teaching this crap. Then I noticed a fellow teacher's name on it. Oh I'll just hand it back to them … wait. Why would he write his name on the story he was teaching, particularly art the bottom where… Oh. He'd written his own short story – as it turns out – the night before, and he'd given it to his students to analyse.

I'm not criticising this practice. On the surface it appears to be a great teaching tool. And I hear of teachers using their own poetry to demonstrate poetic technique, and I'm all for that especially if it stops people teaching other poems written after 1950 by people who aren't called Maya Angelou. But there are so many great, accessible short stories written by others, why would you use your own? In a world where "Lamb to the Slaughter" exists, why would you choose to write a short story you knocked out the night before.

I don't and can't say for certain that all people do this for the same reason he does, but I'm certain I know why he did it, after I marked essay after essay of students talking about this incredibly well written story by this super-insightful author. This had obviously gone right past the usefulness of modelling and straight into the masturbatory realms of ego stroking.

So when I was first published, my first instinct was to hide it from the kids. Despite my ego being the size of the Charlie Sheen's drug problem, it still seemed somewhat distasteful to me; like I would be crossing the Rubicon of self-indulgence.

But a couple of conferences ago, a speaker talked about how many Year 12 students had problems with analysing texts due to three reasons in particular: they felt they had no right to interrogate the author; they don't see the author as a real person, and so they see the text in front of them as being fully formed and not the subject of deliberate choices by a real person; and they find it difficult to get past the suspicion that their English teacher is just making everything up about the text.

And so I changed my mind and handed out "Love the Tattoo" to them. My name was off it, so they had no idea it was mine, just that it was a published story. The students initially reacted the way they always did: slowly, apathetically, superficially.

Then I revealed I was the author and then the class exploded.

Most of the students said: "I knew it was yours!" though they had little reason to suspect it and others would look at the story again and look for ways to identify it as mine. I ask them how they knew, and then we get into a conversation about tone, diction, syntax, imagery. Those students had always had trouble with identifying tone and using personal voice. This helped.

Then I went through the whole process of writing: inspiration; diction choice; plotting; drafting; submitting the story to an editor; swearing at the small-minded, myopic editor and how their idiotic suggestions were going to ruin my masterpiece of short horror; realising I'd never be published unless I made the changes; the sheepish realisation that the changes made the story better; and so on.

So when we analysed the story, I was able to finally give a convincing answer to their questions. "How do you know the author meant to do that?" "Coz I did."

On the other hand it also demonstrated that their assumptions about the text were irrelevant to my intent. Some students made some observations that added to the story, and my response was simply, "Great." I didn't mean that, but I like your meaning better." The process allowed them to realise the active role they had in reading a text.

The discovery of themes worked just as well. Especially when I pointed out to the class that I had no idea of what the theme or values when I wrote the story.

"So what are the themes and values?" "I don't know. What do you think they are?" It was a genuine question of mine and as a mad drama teacher I once saw at another conference said, when a teacher asks a question they know the answer to, many students resent it. Apparently. However, when you ask a question you genuinely don't know the answer to, their natural curiosity and competitive nature kicks in. I admitted I didn't know the theme to the story I wrote and they started exploring what it could be. From that they learnt that they were free to bring their own ideas of what a text is saying without thinking the author has "hidden" something in there to be discovered. Having the actual author stand in front of them, hear their theories and then shrug his shoulders and said, "yeah that'll work" made them realise that all their well-thought ideas for analysis were legitimate.

And once again, it was far more useful for the students to arrive at this conclusion about critical literacy using a text either about someone being permanently mutilated by a stranger, or Santa kidnapping a precocious child, than reading them a story about a boy with pimples asking a girl on a date. And not to mention a shit load more interesting.

If I had a point to this speech it'd probably be this.

I once avoided teaching *Night of the Living Dead* to my top Year 12 students. I mentioned I was planning to teach it to another English teacher and she looked at me like I just said I was planning to douse myself in honey and teach *Scary Movie* entirely in Klingon. So I wussed out. But since then I have given it a go, and it worked brilliantly; its benefits far out-weighed any quizzical, superior stares I received from better educated teachers.

So give it a go. If you're interested in anything I've mentioned and you want a copy, feel free to email me or check out my infrequently updated blog about my struggles as a geek to teach senior school Literature course.

I hope you heard something you can use, enjoyed yourself and don't regret not going to any of the other talks.