Ender’s Game

By Jeffrey Mays

Ender’s Game, winner of the Hugo and Nebula awards, began as a short story published in 1977, and was developed into a novel published in 1985. It became the first release of a series of sequels and prequels, both novels and novellas, numbering upwards of 18, that are still being published as recently as 2012.

Andrew Wiggin is the youngest of three siblings. The name “Ender” is given to him by his sister Valentine when he is young for fear that “Andrew” would be difficult to pronounce. The name however seems to hold significant to his character and the plot of the book. Ender is the third child in a future earth in which there is a Two-child per family policy. His oldest brother Peter is a sociopath who tortures and manipulates not only his younger siblings but animals as well. Valentine, his sister tries to protect Ender from Peter’s brutalities, but the final deliverance comes when Ender’s genius for self-preservation and tactical maneuvers is discovered by the IF, the International Fleet, and Ender is drafted.

The story tells of Ender’s removal from his family around age 6 to be taken to a training station in orbit around Earth. Ender advances rapidly through the ranks of trainees, showing his strength and skill and above all his knack for tactical innovation. The cadets are preparing for an assault on the vast armies of “buggers,” an insectoid race of aliens who in the past have attacked Earth twice, and are supposedly planning a third and final attack to take over Earth and wipe out the population. The cadets undergo regular training simulations which steadily increase in difficulty to the point of being unwinnable. The constant onslaught of ever more difficult simulations and lack of sleep drives Ender to deep cynicism and disillusionment, nevertheless, Ender continually amazes Commander Graff with his ability to overcome every obstacle, and endures many years under the hatred and rivalry of older and less gifted cadets. Ender’s brilliance and unpretentious attitude eventually win out and he gains the respect of his fellow cadets. By the climax of the book, Ender has moved through various companies to become commander of the Dragon Squad, the platoon of youngest but most gifted soldiers.

In the final text, Ender leads the platoon against incalculable odds in the final simulation in which myriads of buggers are approaching. Nevertheless, by choosing a direct attack method that is so bold as to be unanticipated, Ender leads his squad to the nest of the Queen, and in one stroke disables the entire network of alien creatures. The discussion that will ensue can evaluate the narrative strength of the twists that follow, in which 1) we learn that it was not a simulation at all, but a real attack disguised as a simulation in an attempt to alleviate the incredible stress that would ride upon Ender if he knew it were an actual attack, and 2) Ender returns to save the race he once nearly annihilated by delivering a remaining egg to the nesting ground.

A parallel account deals with Peter and Valentine’s political manipulations back on Earth. They too are gifted in their own respects, and undertake to influence global events by creating anonymous internet avatars that drive innovative and sometimes incendiary ideas through the public square. Peter and Valentine assume the pseudonyms of “Locke” and “Demosthenes” and their staged debate becomes so widely viewed and so influential as to stave off wars and drive national political events.

Ender’s Game is categorized as Military Science Fiction, placing it in the same category with War of the Worlds, Battlestar Galactica and Starship Troopers. Regardless of the verdict one may reach about our book, the discussion about the relative merit of sci-fi may prove more fruitful. Some great writers have emerged from the genre, including H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell.

Science Fiction is notoriously difficult to define. In a Wikipedia article, Mark C. Glassy said that the definition of science fiction was like the definition of pornography: we don’t know how to define it but we know it when we see it. And Nabokov said that if we were rigorous with our definitions we should define Shakespeare’s The Tempest as science fiction. Many subgenre’s have been identified, including military sci-fi, space opera, apocalyptic, time travel, alternate histories, and so on. Categories could be expanded to include any sort of fantasy, including speculative fiction (Anthony Burgess’ A Clockwork Orange), horror fiction (Frankenstein) or superhero fiction.

The definition remains slippery as does its contribution to literature. One scholar raises a perennial question: “What is its relationship to fantasy fiction, is its readership still dominated by male adolescents, is it a taste which will appeal to the mature but non-eccentric literary mind?”

Ursula K. LeGuin cites Virginia Wolff in her well-known article “Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown” as follows:

*“I believe that all novels, … deal with character, and that it is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved … The great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character. Otherwise they would not be novelists, but poets, historians, or pamphleteers.”*

LeGuin argues that these same qualifications should be applied to science fiction.

But what is it that makes SF SF? The critic/scholar Tom Shippey suggests that the distinguishing feature of science fiction is the presence of a novum: “*a discrete piece of information recognizable as not-true, but also as not-unlike-true, not-flatly- (and in the current state of knowledge) impossible*"

Another question to consider is whether SF is “serious literature.” One answer focuses on the level of clarity of language. Ender’s Game is nothing if not perfectly transparent as a story.

Again Wikipedia notes that in science fiction the style of writing is often relatively clear and straightforward compared to classical literature. Our own [Orson Scott Card](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orson_Scott_Card) postulated that in science fiction the message and intellectual significance of the work is contained within the story itself and, therefore, there need not be stylistic gimmicks or literary games; but that some writers and critics confuse clarity of language with lack of artistic merit. In Card's words:

*“...a great many writers and critics have based their entire careers on the premise that anything that the general public can understand without mediation is worthless drivel. [...] If everybody came to agree that stories should be told this clearly, the professors of literature would be out of job, and the writers of obscure, encoded fiction would be, not honored, but pitied for their impenetrability.”*

Card and other SF writers seem to be arguing for a place at the table for SF, arguing that it is character development, message and perhaps even intellectual significance that matters, not stylistic features, which may be mere gimmicks and games. In other words, function over form. Intrigue, spectacle and cleverness over art, patience and subtlety.

But if some critics are guilty of equating transparency with lack of artistic merit, then I think Card and his friends may confuse accessibility to the general public with greatness.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed Ender’s Game. I have heard it mentioned outside the context of Athenaeum multiple times, and not simply because it is a forthcoming film. It is one of the SF novels that is widely read and considered a favorite by many people. If nothing else, we are admitted to a new common table by having read this book, a common conversation that sincere human beings are having around us. And let us therefore see the small effort it took to read this book as a worthwhile thing if it brings us in touch with people we love.