

# INTRODUCTION: GEEK POWER

I've always been a geek. And I've always been obsessed with the future.

I used to read tons of futuristic sci-fi stories when I was young. Stuff about space, stuff about time travel, stuff about gadgets and inventions, stuff about superpowers that we might one day have.

You should never doubt the huge influence of comic books, graphic novels, and video games. The influence they have today. The influence they had yesterday: on me, on my friends, on everyone!

When I was a kid growing up in South Wales, I had a mate called Dai Bando. OK, his name might not have been EXACTLY that, but I'm protecting the innocent and making sure I don't get sued. Let's just say that 'Dai Bando' had an immensely fertile imagination.

Dai's imagination was fed and fuelled by comic books of the *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Fantastic Four* variety. The two of us had really deep conversations, even at a young age in primary school. He could have been a professor, no doubt. But he ended up working in a supermarket, and I think I know why.

This is a true story about what Dai did to me and another mate, 'Reggie Latchum': he told us we could become superheroes. How would we achieve such superhero status? Simply by "necking [that's local slang for drinking] some Super-Serum" made by Dai's own fair hand.

I know, I know. 'Reggie' and I must have been sweetly innocent (or stupid) to believe this fable and fabric of nonsense, straight out of the comic books, channeled through Dai's imagination and back out into the 'real' world.

We waited and waited for the big day when our transformation would come: from boy into Super Boy. We got impatient: "*But, Dai, when are we going to become superheroes?*" we justifiably asked. "*Don't worry about that, boys, I've got it covered: I'm making some Super-Serum in my dad's house.*"

Yes. Super-Serum. In his dad's house. On an estate in South Wales, back in 1966.

It would have been wise to question the validity of Dai's claims, but we were far too distracted by his promise of all the trappings superherodom would bring: jumping over buildings, stopping speeding bullets, and of course, the girls.

But we got tired of waiting.

Dai kept on promising and promising, but nothing was delivered. In the end, we simply demanded the Super-Serum. At once. With no delay. NOW! We followed Dai home and impatiently waited outside his house until he 'brought forth' the Super-Serum (in comics, an inventor always seems to 'bring forth' the invention).

As Dai triumphantly came out of the lab (his dad's house), our breath was fully bated. What was he carrying, I hear you wonder. A sleek test-tube full of some fluorescent and clearly cosmic Super-Serum? A wizard potion in a cool Professor Snape-ish phial? A huge syringe with which to transform us forever? No, dear geek, Dai came out of his house with nothing more than a bowl full of ordinary water.

Gutted. In fact, mega-gutted.

Next, picture this: me and 'Reggie Latchum' in a towering Hulk-like rage reaching almost superhero proportions WITHOUT the need for a Super-Serum. After all that waiting, we were severely disappointed. We were incensed. We were INCANDESCENT! We hurled the bowl of water over Dai's head and stormed off into the sunset, disillusioned but determined to find a brighter future.

## "It's Sci-Fi!"

Maybe my Super-Serum experience is the reason why today I get a huge buzz when I hear that one of the predictions I read about as a kid has ACTUALLY turned out to be true. And if you've lived the dream from the start and see the idea turn into reality, it can be simply inspiring.

For example, I was recently blown away by the fact that, while sitting in a 'greasy caf', I was able to watch a live soccer match on my phone. I was suitably enthusiastic to my children: "*Look, kids, I'm watching the football! It's the future! It's sci-fi!*" I said. My kids were totally unimpressed: "*No Dad,*

*it's just a smartphone."*

But, years before that, I'd already got my satisfaction. When I became professor of science at a university, I invented study courses that focused on the future. One course was all about the search for alien life in space. Another was all about the links between science and sci-fi. But the thing they had in common was our future, on Earth and in space.

So it's no surprise that this book is about the future. It's about the ways that, in the past, we imagined the future. And it's about the weird ways in which our imaginings have often come true.

This book is also based on a cool idea – we live in a science fiction world!

OK, maybe that's pretty hard to believe these days when your computer still isn't doing your homework for you, and the family android still isn't putting out the trash!

But think about the world outside your window.

As we switch on the TV, we see the latest groundbreaking discoveries: robots, face transplants, invisibility cloaks – that kind of thing. For the first time in history, we're finding planets outside of our solar system. And back on Earth scientists say the first human to live for a thousand years has already been born. It could be you. Just imagine how messy your bedroom will get by the time you're 200!

Our futuristic world was imagined long ago. Imagined in

the minds of movie directors and the writers of fantastic sci-fi. And now it's the world we live in.

But there's a downside to science fiction – it's not all space tourism and hovering skateboards. The changing environment and growing population were imagined in science fiction too.

Science fiction has always helped us think about the future. And it can STILL help us do so. It can help us choose between the dizzying display of possible futures that lie ahead.

We're still making loads of science fiction. It's everywhere: in comics and books, on TV and in movies, and on every video platform known to gamers.

Of the fifty biggest-selling movies of all time, over half are science fiction films. Audiences of all ages will pay a tenner each to watch the latest science fiction blockbuster on the big screen. Eight million viewers tune in to the BBC to watch *Doctor Who*. And in the ever-expanding world of computer games, science fiction titles rule!

## When did it all begin?

When I was a professor of science, I did some work writing for NASA, organizing speaking tours for Russian cosmonauts, pioneers of space travel. Through this work I found that humans have been making up science fiction stories for hundreds of years.

The earliest stories were space voyages. *They're* in this

book. They come from a time, the 1600s, when astronomers found out that the Earth was in orbit round the Sun, and not the other way around. Ships had started voyaging around the globe. So, writers had already started to imagine sailing out into space, four hundred years ago!

Since then there have been thousands of amazing science fiction stories – stories about aliens and time machines, spaceships and cyborgs, androids and the end of the world. Listen, all the stories have one thing in common. It's this: they're about the way science may affect our lives in the future.

## How to use this book

This book looks at science fiction in bite-size chunks. True, there are thousands of astounding stories. But they can all be sorted into four types: space, time, machine and monster.

So we've divided the book up into these four sections. It's simple, and it works!

Each of these four sections is jam-packed full of examples of how science fiction has shaped the world in which we live. The way we see and do things, the way we dream of things to come. And the way in which science has forced us to explore our future together on this little planet.

## The truth is out there...

# TOP 10 ALIENS

## 1 The Doctor

*Claim to fame: what do you mean claim to fame? He's The Doctor!*

Alien factoids: a humanoid Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey who's able to navigate through time and space using an internally vast time machine called the TARDIS. Be honest, that already sounds like unbeatable credentials! He famously has two hearts, a mega intellect, is able to go without air, is telepathic, and occasionally shows a superhero level of stamina. And on the topic of superheroes...

## 2 Superman

*Claim to fame: erm, he's Superman!?*

Alien factoids: OK, OK, I know elsewhere in this book Kryptonians are listed among the most ridiculous aliens, but this particular Kryptonian, Kal-El, just happens to be one of the greatest cultural icons ever. His arsenal of powers includes flight, faster-than-light speed, an array of super-vision powers, and super-intelligence. In fact, all the things that we humans have, except in a 'super' variety. Apart from

the flying. Oh, and the x-ray vision. Oh, and the... [author continues to mumble list to himself, disproving his own theory].

### **3 The Xenomorph**

*Claim to fame: the ultimate killing machine, from the Alien franchise*

Alien factoids: we first see the Xenomorph when it bursts out from the throbbing chest of actor John Hurt (who's also played The Doctor!) during dinner. For the rest of the movie, director Ridley Scott gives only the merest glimpse of the alien, so we have to piece together its fearful symmetry: snapping sets of fangs, acid for blood which corrodes all it touches, and an incredible appetite for bloody murder. Eek. Ruuuuuuunnnnnnn!

### **4 E.T.**

*Claim to fame: the stranded critter from the 1982 movie E.T.: the Extra-Terrestrial*

Alien factoids: the podgy Einstein lookalike who got left behind on planet Earth has been an enduring favourite of moviegoers for many years. Apparently. They quote his big blue eyes, his telepathic ability, the fact he can make stuff float, and that weird luminous finger that hails cosmic taxis.



## **5 Aliens from the War of the Worlds**

*Claim to fame: they are the first alien invasion from space, they are agents of the void*

Alien factoids: yes, HG Wells' Martians in *War of the Worlds* were the first ever aliens to invade the Earth. **Respect!** They may have looked pathetically weedy inside their tripod vehicles (a 3-legged walker that pre-dates the Star Wars AT-AT Walkers by 80 years) but they had heat-rays that could turn you into Victorian cinders!

## **6 Engineers**

*Claim to fame: humanoid aliens from the 2012 movie Prometheus*

Alien factoids: colossal looking humanoid aliens who create man in *Prometheus*. In the beginning of the film, a sole engineer, like a dark angel, is seen sacrificing himself and his DNA to bring life to planet Earth, and us!

## **7 Prawns**

*Claim to fame: the aliens from the District 9 movie*

Alien factoids: with perhaps a pinch of Predator, the zest of a Xenomorph, and a dash of Ood, you have the recipe for a 'Prawn', the strange creatures at the heart of District 9, who seem to have a weird liking for tinned cat food.

## 8 Worm Guys

*Claim to fame: the mischievous extraterrestrials from Men in Black I (1997) II (2002)*

Alien factoids: looking like some kind of weird hybrid between a meerkat and a stick insect, this motley crew of mutants are so badly behaved they seem like a forerunner of Paul.

## 9 Mr Spock

*Claim to fame: the half-Vulcan from the Star Trek franchise*

Alien factoids: OK, Spock might be half-Vulcan and half-human, but how can we possibly leave someone as famous as him out of our Top Ten? It's not logical, Captain. He's a boffin of the highest order, having served as Science Officer on the USS Enterprise. And his regular dilemmas between logic and emotion remind us, as do many aliens, what it's actually like to be human. If that makes logical sense... [author starts bawling eyes out at being misunderstood].

## 10 The Na'vi

*Claim to fame: the alien race in James Cameron's sci-fi epic Avatar*

Alien factoids: when the movie was first released, the Na'vi

were known as ‘smurfs on a stick’. ‘Smurfs’ because they have sky-tinted skin and ‘on a stick’ because the film’s famous use of 3D made them stick out from the screen a fair bit. Folk may scoff, but the Na’vi are tree-dwelling aliens dedicated to the protection of their land and environment, which teaches humans a welcome lesson.