I am a science fiction writer, which means I spend my working life making up fantastic stories about adventures in strange places and times. I began doing this when I was seventeen and now almost forty years later, a grandfather, I am still doing the same thing. There are some differences to be sure. Science fiction has become immensely more respectable than it was in the 30s; colleges teach it as part of the regular curriculum, foundations support it, even governments acknowledge its existence. The audiences are far larger—some hundreds of millions of people have read my own stories, in some forty languages all around the world. But when you come right down to it, what I do for a career is pretty close to what I did as the idle recreation of a rather immature teenager, and every now and then I confront a question that goes something like: "Isn't that a funny way for a grown man to spend his life?"

I have an answer to that. I've borrowed it from my friend and colleague Arthur C. Clarke; when he was asked why he wrote science fiction in preference to anything else, he said, "Because it's the only literature that is concerned with reality."

That may be a strange claim to make for a kind of writing that has often concerned itself with bug-eyed monsters from the planets of Procyon. But it's true. The great reality of our time is change. And change is what science fiction is all about. Other novelists, poets, essayists, historians—they are in the business of recording it as it happens. Science fiction writers are in the business of anticipating it before it becomes real.

The great truth about change is not only that it is happening, not even that it is happening more rapidly than ever before, but that the rate of change is accelerating all the time. The United States in the year of its bicentennial is far different from the fledgling agricultural federation of 1776. The United States at the time of its tricentennial, a hundred years from now, will be almost unrecognizable, in fundamental ways.

Not even a science fiction writer can guess at some of those changes, but a few are rather clear: tomorrow's realities, the realities of the tricentennial year.

What are these realities?