
Past is Prologue

Science Fiction and Ways of Working

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This issue welcomes Neal Wyatt, joining Laurie Tarulli as coeditor of the Readers' Advisory column. With her arrival we introduce an occasional series exploring genre and format. For our first foray, Gillian Speace, Readers' Advisory Librarian, NoveList, provides a guided tour of the reoccurring themes of science fiction, suggesting ways advisors can use its perennial concerns to connect readers to the genre's rich backlist as well as keep them immersed in new works—and worlds. By pairing a classic work to a new title and, conversely, a new work to a backlist staple, advisors can make full use of the collection, expand the range of titles they keep in their proverbial RA back pocket, and help readers access the full richness of the genre.—*Editor*

"People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion."

—Albert Einstein

One common assumption about science fiction (SF) is that it's about the future. In fact, science fiction is about the present: regardless of setting, stories in this genre reflect the concerns of the era in which they were written. Some anxieties are ever-green (technological advances, ever-changing social mores), while others are more cyclical (authoritarian governments, economic instability), but all turn up again and again in different forms as they respond to current events.

Because of its perennial concerns, readers' advisory (RA) librarians can use classic tropes of SF to help balance readers' love of the old with their desire for the new, crafting a richly textured—and richly resourced—SF RA service. Advisors can introduce fans of Arthur C. Clarke to Chinese author Liu Cixin or connect a longtime reader of military SF to Kameron Hurley's *The Light Brigade*. Classic science fiction can also help more recent converts get in touch with the genre's roots, thereby creating pathways through the collection. Readers of recent "generation ship" stories, such as Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* or Kim Stanley Robinson's *Aurora*, can be pointed toward Robert Heinlein's *Orphans in the Sky*, bridging backward to a classic example of the trope. With this concept in mind, here are a few key classic SF themes with contemporary relevance along with suggested titles to pair.

LATE CAPITALISM: CYBERPUNK, MEGACORPORATIONS, AND MASS SURVEILLANCE

Suggested Pairings

Classic to New: Gibson, William. *Neuromancer* (1984). *Sprawl* trilogy: Older, Malka. *Infomocracy* (2016). Centenal trilogy

New to Classic: Hart, Rob. *The Warehouse* (2019): Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

The destabilizing effects of the Great Recession have led to an increase in SF that examines wealth concentration and widening economic disparities that reinforce existing social inequalities on a global scale, from Karl Schroeder's *Stealing Worlds* to Chen Quifan's *Waste Tide* to the film *Sorry to Bother You*. Termed "Late Capitalism," this group of books focuses on economic dystopias.¹

There's little doubt that the current bull market for economic dystopias reflects anxieties about the contemporary economy: a real world in which children are threatened with family separation over school lunch debt and in which electronic surveillance systems monitor every movement made by warehouse workers (except for their deaths), does not seem so far removed from a fictional one in which individuals are owned by shareholders (as in Dani and Eytan Kollin's *The Unincorporated Man*) or assigned a social credit score based on their perceived value to society (as in Yudhanjaya Wijeratne's *Numbercaste*). However, dystopian fiction built around economic systems is not new. The boom-and-bust economic cycles of the past, as well as the genre's longstanding preoccupation with social inequality, have resulted in numerous works of SF in which powerful conglomerates dictate nearly all aspects of people's everyday lives.

A central trope in economic dystopias is the *megacorporation*, which has come to be closely associated with *cyberpunk*, an SF subgenre that explores the effects of advanced technology on a global capitalist society, often from the perspectives of economically marginalized characters. Megacorporations in SF frequently represent a merging of government and private industry, resulting in interchangeable entities that work hand-in-glove to exploit the general population while suppressing dissent. Notable examples of the megacorporation can be found in William Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy, not to mention post-cyberpunk works such as Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*.

As deregulation and privatization are real-world results of real-life policy decisions made in the 1970s and 1980s, it makes sense that SF from this period engages with these issues. However, earlier SF contains numerous examples of corporations that become *de facto* rulers of the world, such as the Presteign clan in Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1956) or General Technics in John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), not to mention the monolithic multinationals found throughout Philip K. Dick's novels.

Governments, and corporations fulfilling the traditional functions of government, require effective messaging to convince people to act against their own best interests. The difference is one of terminology: governments rely on "propaganda," megacorporations on "marketing."

The plot of Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth's 1952 satirical novel *The Space Merchants* revolves around a PR campaign—dreamed up by the US government and carried out by an advertising firm—to convince Americans to colonize Venus, a miserable hellscape even by the standards of a twenty-second-century society struggling with resource scarcity due to overpopulation and environmental depredation resulting from intensive fossil fuel extraction. And yet, the general population, despite an ever-declining standard of living, appears to be appeased by a plethora of consumer goods. A decade later, J.G. Ballard's short story "The Subliminal Man" explores consumerism and its dependence on artificially generated needs reinforced by advertising.

Advertising, of course, does not exist without mass media. That may be part of the reason that consumer technology is an ongoing source of anxiety in SF (consider the focus on our relationships with mobile devices and media in Netflix's *Black Mirror* SF anthology series). From the two-way "telesccreens" of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to the wearable "SeeChange cameras" of Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, dystopian SF frequently depicts communication technologies as tools of authoritarian regimes, spreading propaganda and misinformation while conducting mass surveillance. The technologies in question may change (from television to the internet), as might the exact formulation of threat (corporatocracy replaces totalitarianism as the evil regime *du jour*), but the result—violations of basic human rights—is the same.

The interplay of technology, government, and media has taken on renewed relevance in the past two decades, as the twenty-first century has been shaped by events such as 9/11, the resulting "War on Terror," and the surveillance state that has arisen in response, aided and abetted by technology companies that remain largely unaccountable. Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother*, Nick Harkaway's *Gnomon*, and Paul J. McAuley's *Whole Wide World* are just a handful of books that explore these issues.

From Malka Older's Centenal cycle (beginning with *Infomocracy*) to the HBO television series *Westworld*, today's SF is deeply concerned with the rise of Big Data and its weaponization by megacorporations, which profit from violating the privacy of billions and harvesting their personal information. And what Big Data is to twenty-first-century SF, the early internet was to cyberpunk: these contemporary works build upon the foundations laid by Gibson et al. and expand on the themes of bleeding edge technology, rising social inequality, and the corrosive effects of global capitalism.

Meanwhile, the nascent online culture first depicted in cyberpunk has matured, yet its vision of a free and open society made possible by the web has been replaced by a reality in which technology imprisons rather than liberates and in which a handful of wealthy and thus powerful individuals profit at

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the expense of everyone else. From Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* to Max Barry's *Jennifer Government*, numerous contemporary SF novels examine the conflicts that arise from technologies underpinning both systems of social credit and social control.

ALIENS: FIRST CONTACT AND INVASION

Suggested Pairings

Classic to New: Heinlein, Robert. *The Puppet Masters* (1951); Thompson, Tade. *Rosewater* (2016). Wormwood trilogy

New to Classic: Liu, Cixin. *The Three-Body Problem* (2008). Remembrance of Earth's Past; Clarke, Arthur. C. *Childhood's End* (1953)

Extraterrestrials represent the ultimate “other,” regardless of form (humanoid or nonhumanoid) or intent (benign, malign, or indifferent to humankind). As such, their presence in SF encourages us to examine what we are as well as what we are not. Stories about aliens prompt us to reflect on human nature and to consider our identity and values, whether individually or collectively. Less positively, they can also betray our anxieties about outsiders. Just as anxieties about foreign peoples and nations are cyclical, so, too, can readers of contemporary alien encounter tales find titles of interest in classic SF.

Stories about aliens fall into two broad categories: alien invasions and first-contact stories. Although these themes can overlap, alien invasion stories typically focus on conflict between humans and aliens, while first-contact stories, which take a more anthropological view of encounters between humans and extraterrestrial civilizations, tend to focus on diplomatic relations.

H. G. Wells's 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds* introduced the alien invasion trope to literature. Wells, who also helped to lay the foundations of military SF with “The War in the Air,” drew on so-called “invasion literature” of the period to explore the concept of invaders from space.² These narratives rise and fall in popularity and, to some extent, reflect the anxieties of the era in which they were written: Edgar Rice Burroughs's 1925 novel, *The Moon Men*, was influenced by the Red Scare of the post-World War I period, and the Cold War would produce a number of alien invasion narratives involving covert infiltration of the human body and mind-control, notably Robert Heinlein's 1951 novel *The Puppet Masters*.

First contact in the modern sense came later. One of the earliest examples of this theme can be found in Murray Leinster's short novel *First Contact* (1945), which is among the first to describe a universal translation device (a perennial interest of SF creators and fans, not to mention technology companies). First contact stories are often concerned with communication as a means of building interspecies trust, although the degree to which this is considered possible or even desirable varies greatly within the genre.

On one end of the spectrum is the *Star Trek* franchise (1966–present), in which peaceful coexistence between different interstellar cultures is both possible and achievable; on the other is Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961), which argues that the limitations of human bodies and minds renders us incapable of understanding an extraterrestrial intelligence. Somewhere in the middle are stories ranging from China Mieville's *Embassytown* to James Cambias's *A Darkling Sea* to Ted Chiang's “Story of Your Life,” suggesting that communication is possible, but that differences in values or worldview may preclude true understanding.

One particularly interesting development in recent SF is Afrofuturist alien invasion tales set in regions grappling with historical legacies of colonialism. Cadwell Turnbull's *The Lesson* unfolds on St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands, which the alien Ynaa have chosen as their base of operations. Although the Ynaa insist that they mean no harm to the locals, actions speak louder than words as they react to minor provocations with extreme force. Such incidents echo the many historical examples of imperial powers answering native resistance, perceived or actual, with brutal reprisals in the name of peacekeeping.

Both Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* and Tade Thompson's Wormwood trilogy are set in Nigeria, the former in a vibrant near-future Lagos, the latter in the fictional city of Rosewater, which encircles an alien biodome. Despite benevolent intentions, the aliens of *Lagoon*—self-described “agents of change”—arguably do more harm than good by imposing their values on the human communities they encounter. The motives of *Rosewater*'s aliens are murkier, yet their presence feels familiar to Nigerian onlookers who are “unimpressed, even in our knowledge that it is the most significant event in Earth's history. We've seen colonizers before, and they are similar, whether intercontinental or interplanetary.”

Unlike earlier alien invasion narratives, which cast extraterrestrials as the ultimate “foreign menace” threatening (white) Earthlings and their way of life, recent explorations of this theme draw explicit parallels between space invaders and European imperialists, who literally invade the spaces of people of color and use their “superior” understanding and “advanced” technologies to reshape these spaces to suit the invaders' needs.

THE POSTHUMAN FUTURE: UPLIFT, AI, AND CYBORGS

Suggested Pairings

Classic to New: Asimov, Isaac. *I, Robot* (1950); Wilson, Daniel. *Guardian Angels and Other Monsters* (2018)

New to Classic: Bodard, Aliette de. “The Shipmaker” and “The Waiting Stars.” Collected in *Of Wars, and Memories, and Starlight* (2019); McCaffrey, Anne. *The Ship Who Sang* (1969)

One enduring source of speculation in SF is posthumanism, which asks not “What becomes of us?” but “What do we become?” Often (but not always) set in the distant future, posthuman SF imagines how our species might change over time, whether through evolution or technological intervention. Although the methods may differ, the outcome is the same: at some point, by some means, we become something else.

While the theme of posthumanism in SF encompasses numerous avenues of potential transformation, the majority of contemporary posthuman SF falls into two categories: human-like computers and computer-like humans. The former includes stories about artificial intelligence (AI) and the technological singularity; the latter includes stories about cyborgs and biotechnology. These themes are particularly relevant today thanks to concurrent advances in medical and computing technology, which echoes similar advances in the postwar era of the mid-twentieth century. Once again, this presents an opportunity for the RA librarian to draw connections between classic and contemporary works touching on these themes.

Human-like computers appear in the genre first. While mechanical beings can be found in the literature of classical antiquity, our familiar word *robot* (derived from the Czech word *robota*, or “serf labor”) makes its first appearance in playwright Karel Čapek’s 1920 drama, *R.U.R.*, in which manufactured people revolt against their human enslavers, resulting in the near-extinction of the human species. Although Čapek introduced the ever-popular theme of robot uprisings to SF, Russian-American SF author Isaac Asimov made equally important contributions to AI-themed SF through his short story collection *I, Robot*.³ Asimov’s robot stories take the basic premise of the mechanical servant and use it to explore philosophical issues such as morality or free will, or social ones such as bigotry and discrimination. Artificial beings as diverse as *Star Wars*’s R2-D2, Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and even *Futurama*’s cigar-chomping robot Bender owe their existence to Asimov.

Of course, AI is not necessarily benign. SF author Vernor Vinge introduced the idea of the technological singularity in his essay, “The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era.”⁴ Drawing on British mathematician I.J. Good’s concept of an “intelligence explosion,” Vinge describes the hypothetical point at which accelerating technological progress leads to the creation of “entities with greater than human intelligence.” At which point, Vinge suggests, humans will become obsolete. Is obsolescence the same as extinction? Will machines destroy humans or enslave them? Or is there even a role for humans in a posthuman world? These are just some of the questions AI-themed SF explores.

Today, advances in AI, anxiety about automation, and expanding conceptions of identity have contributed to a resurgence of SF involving robots. Such stories explore what it means to be human on both a personal level (What is gender? How do our physical bodies, their abilities and

limitations, shape our lived experiences?) and a political one (What basic rights are individuals or certain groups entitled to? Who decides?)

Similar concerns about advances in computing are reflected in fiction from the dawn of the computer age. In both the film and novel versions of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the supercomputer HAL 9000 malfunctions and attempts to kill an entire spaceship crew. The Allied Mastercomputer (“AM”) of Harlan Ellison’s “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” (1966) is an AI with an unquenchable thirst for revenge; having brought about humanity’s near-extinction, it keeps five humans captive to torture them.

However, for every chilling “rise of the machines” tale, such as Daniel Wilson’s *Robocalypse* or Todd McAulty’s *The Robots of Gotham*, there are thought-provoking novels featuring sympathetic synthetic lifeforms navigating an unsympathetic world, such as Becky Chambers’s *A Close and Common Orbit* or Martha Wells’s *All Systems Red*.

By contrast, stories about computer-like humans focus on human evolution as opposed to human obsolescence. Charles Stross’s 2005 novel *Accelerando* traces the shift from human to posthuman by following three successive generations of the same family before, during, and after the Singularity, while Greg Egan’s *Diaspora* shows a trifurcated thirtieth-century posthuman humanity comprised of “fleshers” (i.e., normal humans), Gleisner robots (human brains embodied in machines), and “polises” (supercomputers containing digital copies of billions of humans).

Although there is no shortage of depictions of societies transformed by cybernetic technology, many SF stories about computer-like humans focus on individual cyborgs, or augmented humans whose capabilities are enhanced or extended by technology. Early cyborgs represented medical interventions designed to restore lost function. C.L. Moore’s “No Woman Born” (1941) introduces Deirdre, a popular entertainer whose brain is implanted in a faceless mechanical body following a tragic accident. Similarly, the plot of Anne McCaffrey’s 1969 novel *The Ship Who Sang* centers around humans with severe birth defects whose disembodied brains are harnessed to power starships. Although the novel will strike contemporary readers as highly problematic in its depiction of disabled people, it represents an influential treatment of the cyborg theme. The mind-ships of Aliette de Bodard’s Xuya Universe can be read as a direct response to McCaffrey’s brainships, employing a now-familiar trope to examine issues such as consent and cultural relativism.

The cyborg theme in SF encompasses everything from adaptive technologies (to facilitate bodily autonomy) to technological enhancements (to extend physical capabilities) to technological immortality (to cheat death). However, as advances in technology transform science fiction into science fact, the focus of these stories shift towards achievements still beyond our grasp: namely, immortality. Neal Stephenson’s *Fall: Or, Dodge in Hell* chronicles the digital afterlife of a deceased tech mogul whose brain is scanned and uploaded to the cloud, while in Richard K. Morgan’s *Altered Carbon*

every person has a “cortical stack” (digital copy of themselves) that can be “resleeved” in a new body. Both works owe a great debt to Robert Sheckley’s 1958 novel *Immortality, Inc.*, which follows the misadventures of a wealthy deceased man who is revived in a future society where death is inconsequential, due to the ability to download one’s consciousness into a new body. Although this novel is not the first to explore mind uploads as a means of cheating death, it does introduce a notable feature of technological immortality in SF, namely, that it depends on one’s resources: wealthy individuals can pay to extend their lifespan indefinitely, while others cannot.

Sheckley’s observation that wealth buys health has strong echoes in contemporary SF, which expresses ambivalence about scientific breakthroughs, particularly in biotechnology and biomedical engineering, stemming from awareness that not everyone’s life will be improved by such advances. Books such as Annalee Newitz’s *Autonomous* and Laura Lam’s *False Hearts* explore scenarios in which the direct benefits of scientific progress are neither equitably distributed nor accessible to all who need them. In biopunk novels such as Paul J. McAuley’s *Fairyland* (1995), Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* (2008), and Jeff VanderMeer’s *Borne* (2017), biotechnology even contributes to the creation of sentient beings that lack the rights and protections afforded to humans.

THE END TIMES: CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE DYING EARTH

Suggested Pairings

Classic to New: Ballard, J.G. *The Drowned World* (1962); Robinson, Kim Stanley. *New York 2140* (2017)

New to Classic: Atwood, Margaret. *The Year of the Flood* (2009). MaddAddam trilogy; Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Talents* (1998). Earthseed series

The existential threat posed by climate change is ever-present in SF, whether as a driver of events or, increasingly, as a background element. Author Annalee Newitz has observed that “any story about the future that’s at least a century out has to include a dramatic picture of climate change.”⁵ Climate change, in other words, is the new normal. Climate fiction, sometimes called “cli-fi,” imagines the not-so-distant future of Earth and its endangered inhabitants as they struggle to survive and adapt to dramatic environmental changes, as in Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife*, Chang-rae Lee’s *On a Full Sea*, or Omar El Akkad’s *American War*. Accompanying this trend is a rise in dystopian fiction in which current problems lead to unrest and societal breakdown, or even human extinction.

Published in 1962, J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (and its companion novel, *The Drought*) offers one of the earliest realistic fictional explorations of a world ravaged by climate

change. Although it explicitly cites the greenhouse effect and the melting of the polar ice caps as catalysts for widespread environmental devastation, the novel attributes the destruction to natural disaster rather than human activity. Although less common than cataclysmic climate change, human-induced climate change is not exactly rare in SF. Writers tended to depict it as the result of nuclear war until the 1970s, a period of heightened environmental consciousness that saw the publication of novels such as John Brunner’s *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), which sees a character arrested for trying to obtain air-pollution data; Kate Wilhelm’s *Where the Sweet Birds Sing* (“As soon as man stopped adding his megatons of filth into the atmosphere . . . [it] had reverted to what it must have been long ago”); and Arthur Herzog’s *Heat* (1977).

Arguably more important than scientifically accurate fictional depictions of anthropogenic climate change are culturally and politically accurate fictional depictions, such as Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993), in which global warming exacerbates widespread societal breakdown, and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Science in the Capitol* trilogy (2004–07), which focuses on scientists’ efforts to avert a slow-motion climate catastrophe stalling in the face of human complacency and a lack of political will.

A clear forerunner of climate fiction is the “dying Earth” novel, which takes its name from Jack Vance’s 1950 short story collection *The Dying Earth* about a far-future world in which the sun has reached the end of its lifespan. Blending SF and fantasy, Vance’s book spawned an entire subgenre, reaching its apotheosis with the publication of Gene Wolfe’s science fantasy epic series *Book of the New Sun*. Unlike the swift catastrophes of most apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, where a single asteroid or nuclear bomb ends human civilization in a flash, dying Earth stories resemble the “slow-pocalypses” of climate fiction, in which a dwindling human population survives in the ruins of civilization. Tone is arguably more important than setting: the lyrical, elegiac tone that permeates dying earth novels can be seen in non-climate apocalyptic fiction such as Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*. Novels that take a dying Earth approach to climate change include Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy (beginning with *Oryx and Crake*), Claire Vaye Watkins’s *Gold Fame Citrus*, and Edan Lepucki’s *California*.

One notable difference is that in the dying Earth subgenre, survivors are more likely to respond to their situation with resignation, whereas in modern climate fiction the emphasis is on surviving, adapting, and (where possible) rebuilding. Both Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* and Alex di Francesco’s *All City* take place in a submerged twenty-first-century New York City and feature a diverse cast of characters refashioning society to reflect the new world order. L.X. Beckett’s *Gamechanger* envisions a future in which global cooperation leads to an eventual reversal of the effects of climate change and a more sustainable society.

TIME TRAVEL: THE DARKEST TIMELINE

Suggested Pairings

Classic to New: Williamson, Jack. *The Legion of Time* (1952); Newitz, Annalee. *The Future of Another Timeline* (2019)

New to Classic: Crouch, Blake. *Recursion* (2019); Bradbury, Ray “A Sound of Thunder” (1952)

Science fiction excels in extrapolating the effects of small changes in society, so it’s no wonder the theme of time travel is a perennial favorite in the genre. Most of the major time travel tropes were laid down during the so-called Golden Age of SF. Ray Bradbury’s “A Sound of Thunder” (1952) was among the first to explore the unintended consequences (the “ripple effects”) of time travel to the past, while novels such as Poul Anderson’s Time Patrol series (1955–95) and Isaac Asimov’s *The End of Eternity* (1955) introduce the concept of time police, entities tasked with enforcing the rules of causality to ensure the continued existence of the “correct” timeline.

Of course, the notion of a correct timeline reflects a desire to maintain the status quo by safeguarding the systems that are the source of a dominant group’s power. Recently, the adage “history is written by the victors” seems apropos as “change wars” make their way back into SF for the first time in decades. Fought across time, change wars weaponize time travel to ensure the existence of one timeline over another; typical tactics include manipulating causality or laying paradoxes like landmines. Fans of *Doctor Who* will recognize this trope.

The term is derived from Fritz Leiber’s Change Wars series, which unfolds against the backdrop of a temporal war called “The Big Time” in which two factions battle for control of the timeline. However, the groundwork for this concept was laid by Jack Williamson’s earlier Legion of Time books, about a squad of time traveling warriors deployed to win a key battle in a time war.

As this theme evolves, the reasons for change wars soon shift from pragmatic goals of self-preservation to ideological aims: in Poul Anderson’s *Corridors of Time* (1966), opponents represent “two ways of thought and life—of being.” Stories that revolve around competing versions of reality resonate deeply with contemporary readers living in a polarized society where it often seems like each side is battling not only for victory but for the extermination of their opponents. Annalee Newitz’s *The Future of Another Timeline* casts human history as a kind of Wikipedia page that can be edited by time travelers and pits a coalition of feminist activists against a regressive group of male chauvinists in an ongoing campaign to reshape societal rules and norms.

Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone’s lyrical epistolary novel *This is How You Lose the Time War* introduces covert operatives representing rival timelines, framing it (à la *Corridors of Time*, above) as a winner-take-all battle between a

technologically advanced future and a more pastoral one. Unusually for books of this type, the novel advocates love over war, emphasizing the protagonists’ creative attempts to break down ideological barriers and reach across a divide that seems impossible to bridge.

A related time-travel theme concerns whose stories are heard and whose are believed. In a world of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” reality can be difficult to discern (especially with time travel in the mix). Driving the plot of Dexter Palmer’s *Version Control* is one woman’s nagging sense that something is amiss in her world—the result of scientists testing a time machine, which causes subtle changes to reality. The main character experiences this as “a subtle wrongness—not within herself, but in the world.” Despite the correctness of her perception, her concerns are dismissed because she herself is not a scientist and because of her past struggles with alcohol abuse.

Similarly, Blake Crouch’s *Recursion* introduces False Memory Syndrome (FMS), a psychiatric condition that results in people having “two sets of memories. One true, one false.” Those living with FMS have vivid memories of lives they have not lived, full of loved ones who may or may not exist. In fact, this condition turns out to be a side effect of other people recklessly changing the past without considering the repercussions. The result is a sort of temporal gaslighting, where one’s sanity—or entire existence—may be collateral damage to another person’s tinkering with history.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE?

Suggested Pairings

Classic to New: Ellison, Harlan (ed.) *Dangerous Visions* (1967); Imarisha, Walidah and adrienne marie brown (eds.) *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements* (2015)

New to Classic: Chambers, Becky. *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018). Wayfarer series: White, James. *Hospital Station* (1962). Sector General series

And yet, not everything is doom and gloom. A welcome recent trend in the genre is a more hopeful SF that looks both outward, with the goal of imagining our future among the stars, and inward, with the goal of creating a more just and inclusive human society here on Earth.

For every SF novel that contemplates humanity’s probable extinction, another looks beyond the bounds of Earth to imagine humanity’s future among the stars. Stories of space exploration and planetary colonization have undergone something of a resurgence of late, as authors use outer space as the setting for a wide variety of galaxy-spanning societies, from Karen Lord’s *The Best of All Possible Worlds* to Becky Chambers’s Wayfarer series (beginning with *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*) to Nathan Lowell’s Golden Age of the Solar Clipper books. The spacefaring societies depicted

in these books are not perfect, but they are largely peaceful ones full of moral characters trying to do the right thing.

Hopeful SF has a long and storied history. Television's *Star Trek: The Original Series* is well known for its idealism, but it's by no means the only work of SF that presents an optimistic view of the future. James White's Sector General novels (1962–99), about a hospital space station staffed by medical personnel both human and alien, offers uplifting accounts of interspecies cooperation; its diverse (at least, on the alien side; humans are mostly male and entirely white) cast works together to save lives, not destroy them. Although it lacks Sector General's pacifist worldview, Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan saga also features characters whose moral integrity drives their actions.

Science fiction has an unfortunate reputation for being a genre written for and by white men. While this perception is not totally inaccurate, SF has also historically been more diverse than people give it credit for. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of New Wave SF of the 1960s and 70s is its success in introducing greater diversity to SF. Although women had been making substantial contributions to SF since the genre's earliest days, writers and editors including Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Judith Merril pioneered an explicitly feminist SF that explored contemporary social issues through a speculative lens. Other forms of diversity are still a work in progress. While there is a rich tradition of African American speculative fiction dating back (at least) to W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Comet," there is less evidence for a community of black writers in the genre during this period.⁶ Similarly, there have always been LGBTQIA individuals within the ranks of SF writers, such as Arthur C. Clarke, but in the pre-Stonewall era there was no real community to speak of. As a black, gay writer of speculative fiction, Samuel R. Delany occupied a singular position in the field, producing groundbreaking SF in which he drew on personal experience to explore issues of race, gender, and sexuality (among others) at a time when this was not familiar territory for the genre.

Nevertheless, the project of creating an inclusive body of SF continues, with recent anthologies such as *A People's Future of the United States*, edited by Victor LaValle and John Joseph Adams, and *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements*, edited by Walidah Imarisha and adrienne marie brown) collecting SF stories from diverse groups of contributors that approach speculative fiction as a form of activism. Meanwhile, SF attracts increasing numbers of talented writers from traditionally underrepresented groups, including women writers, writers of color, LGBTQIA writers,

and international writers whose works are translated and read by an increasingly global audience. Better yet, the call for greater inclusivity and diversity of viewpoints in SF has largely come from fans, who perhaps recognize that big existential problems require the bright ideas of as many minds as possible.

Ultimately, in SF, everything old is new again (and again and again). For this reason, it's crucial to look both to the past and the present to understand the genre's appeal and to help fans navigate the universe of SF. Hopefully, these recommendations will offer useful starting points for introducing new and classic titles to SF readers seeking to expand their horizons.

References and Notes

1. Unlike most of the Frankfurt School's contributions to intellectual discourse, the phrase "late capitalism" has achieved something like "meme" status. Popularized by Fredric Jameson in his influential book *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, the term's meaning has shifted since its introduction, from describing the transformation of culture into commodity to what Annie Lowrey, writing for the *Atlantic*, describes as a "catchall phrase for the indignities and absurdities of our contemporary economy, with its yawning inequality and super-powered corporations and shrinking middle class." See Annie Lowrey, "Why The Phrase 'Late Capitalism' Is Suddenly Everywhere," *The Atlantic*, May 1, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/late-capitalism/524943/>.
2. Such as "The Battle of Dorking," a rather prescient 1871 short story that imagined an invasion of Britain by a technologically advanced Germany. See Tom Reiss, "Imagining the Worst," *The New Yorker*, Nov. 20, 2005, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/11/28/imagining-the-worst>
3. The rules, first laid out in Asimov's 1942 short story "Run-around," are as follows: *First Law: A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. Second Law: A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. Third Law: A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.* Later, Asimov would append a zeroth law: "Zeroth" Law: *A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.*
4. Vernor Vinge, "The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era," VISION-21 Symposium, March 30–31, 1993, <https://edoras.sdsu.edu/~vinge/misc/singularity.html>.
5. Amy Brady, "In 'Autonomous,' Climate Change is a Disease Vector," *Chicago Review of Books*, Sept. 28, 2019, <https://chireviewofbooks.com/2017/09/28/autonomous-annalee-newitz-interview/>.
6. See Nisi Shawl's superb essay "A Crash Course in the History of Black Science Fiction," Nisi Shawl, 2018, <http://www.nisishawl.com/CCHBSF.html>.