

The Guardian view on prescience in novels: reading the future

theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/30/the-guardian-view-on-prescience-in-novels-reading-the-future

Editorial

30. januar 2022



When scientists hailed a breakthrough this month – a man with end-stage heart disease was given a genetically modified pig's heart – some non-scientists found the idea familiar. The procedure had already been described by Malorie Blackman in her novel *Pig Heart Boy*.

Reality, it seems, can make fictions come true, and Blackman joins a distinguished line – Jonathan Swift (who posited, among other things, two moons for Mars); Aldous Huxley (oral contraception, mood medicine, test-tube babies); HG Wells (atomic bombs); Orwell (telescreens, mass surveillance) – of writers whose works acquire, over the years, the tingle of prescience. More recently a number of novelists were blindsided by an actual pandemic overtaking their invented plagues. Christina Sweeney-Baird's *The End of Men* was finished in December 2019, Bethany Clift's *Last One at the Party* was published in February 2021 and Oana Aristide's *Under the Blue* a month later. Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* (May 2020) even imagines a coronavirus arising in east Asia. And Joanna Kavenna's 2019 novel *Zed*, set in a near future controlled by a tech giant, becomes more real every day.

But perhaps that is to look at the matter the wrong way round. Margaret Atwood has said, in relation to her own dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*, that it arose out of an acute sense of the then-present; she was responding to nuggets of misogynistic authoritarianism

cropping up in the news. Blackman noticed speculation about modified pigs' hearts in the press; epidemiologists had warned of the threat of a major global pandemic. Swift's work often mocked the scientists of his day.

While it is true that all future is by definition fiction, these tales arise, argued Atwood, when a writer asks "what might happen if those trends continued ... Would we like that? Is that where we want to live?" Seeming prophecy is thus a case of emotional and social insight tethered to current reality. In 1909, EM Forster published The Machine Stops, a short story in which "humanity, in its desire for comfort, had over-reached itself. It had exploited the riches of nature too far. Quietly and complacently, it was sinking into decadence, and progress had come to mean progress of the machine" – which, partly by shutting humanity into a cave underground, severs any relationship with the real world. It is an unnervingly accurate picture of the western world in 2020 lockdown – complete with isolations, Zoom-like calls and machine-controlled delivery of food and entertainment.

This is one of the great things fiction can do: pay a particular kind of attention. It is a kind of eavesdropping, and a looking under the surfaces of things. Seen like this, it makes sense that a group of literary scholars in Germany was tasked with predicting civil unrest by reading novels and plays – and especially by noting reactions to them. Was a novel censored? Whom by, and why? Was it garlanded or a bestseller? They were not surprised when Azerbaijan, which had been supplying Georgian libraries with anti-Armenian books, went to war in Nagorno-Karabakh. The programme was halted after three years, but the point had been made. Though novelists are not seers, we would do well not to underestimate their grasp on what is to come.