

The Future is not a Foreign Country

by Arifa Akbar

In 1909, a group of artists and poets from Italy published a manifesto on the front page of the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*¹, which announced the new movement of Futurism. Eleven articles summed up its philosophy: modernity had been liberated from the past. In article eight the author asked: “Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday.”²

The next article advocated the waging of war as a way to purify the future from the mess of the past. Humans could literally kill the past, it was thought, and start afresh at being the *tabula rasa* of their new, best selves.

It is no surprise that Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the poet who wrote the manifesto, also aligned himself to the nascent Fascist movement in Italy. He shows us – over a century later – how tyrannical it is to regard the future as having a ‘purified’ geography, separate from the past, floating one hundred or one thousand years ahead from the present, and divorced from any sense of the history that has led us up to it.

The unwritten manifesto for *Future Library* could not be more opposite. It sees the future in all its impure glory. Conceived by the visionary Scottish born artist Katie Paterson, this is concept art that enlists acres of space – a forest and a library – and acres of time, stretching the length of one hundred years, from 2014 when one thousand Norwegian spruce saplings were planted on the outskirts of Oslo, to 2114 when that forest will be felled.

One hundred writers will be enlisted to contribute an unpublished manuscript, one every year, and these will be read for the first time in 2114. Margaret Atwood, the Canadian novelist celebrated for her speculative fictions, handed over her manuscript in 2014; David Mitchell did the same in 2015 and the Icelandic writer, Sjón, followed after him in 2016. The Turkish writer, Elif Shafak, now submits her work for 2017, with all the imaginative richness that a multi-lingual, boundary-crossing novelist, activist and intellectual can bring to the venture.

Shafak’s work revisits the past and interrogates it to better understand the way we live today, from the Armenian genocide of 1915 by Ottoman authorities in *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006) to the life and philosophy of Rumi in *Forty Rules of Love* (2010) to female identity, Islamic thought and the dangers of ideological dogma in her latest novel *Three Daughters of Eve* (2017). Her stories contain a wide internationalism and they rove across liminal spaces and identities. The future will see the best of us when

¹ <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2883730/f1.image>

² https://www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto_futurista.pdf

her manuscript is unsealed. Even if we are erecting physical borders in our present day, Shafak's words will show that our imaginative and intellectual borders were porous, open, forever shifting and hybrid.

Each work in *Future Library* will sit in sealed boxes inside a 'silent room' in the New Deichmanske Library of Bjørvika, in Oslo. The writers too take an oath of silence when they submit their work to the archive. No one can discuss its contents. Its readers must always remain in the future. Atwood has likened the project to the tale of *Sleeping Beauty*, and the analogy is a vivid one, as if every story will drink a magic potion and fall under a spell, waiting to be kissed back to life by the eyes of its future readers.

The silent room conjures its own mythology with so many thousands of unread words fluttering in their sealed encasings like trapped butterflies, waiting to be released. The silence of that room might, as the years turn to decades, begin to feel heavy with wisdom like the sand dunes of the Scetes desert in Egypt where the early Christian Desert Fathers³ of the 3rd century pitched their homes so as to be surrounded by the silence and to hear the whispered words of the Divine inside it. Paterson's silent room will hold echoes of the unspoken truths and imaginings of the past century, locked away, waiting to be heard.

Future Library will see its physical completion when the felled forest is turned into paper, and the paper into an anthology of all one hundred submissions; a printing press will be stored for this purpose – just in case our successors have turned away from the printed word. Only at this juncture will these works deliver their message to the world.

It is a thrilling artwork with as many ecological ripples as literary ones, even if – or maybe because – we have to imagine its final outcome. Because, of course, we will no longer be around to know what plots, themes and characters teem inside these silent manuscripts and neither will Atwood, Mitchell, Sjón, Shafak et al. It is not only a sobering reminder of our mortality, and theirs, but also an invitation to consider what it means to be posthumously read, remembered, rediscovered, and who, in fact, writers seek to tell their stories to.

Do they write for themselves, or just for the pleasure of artistic creation? Who do they hope to reach beyond their peer group? The geographically and linguistically removed readers who consume their work in translation in Russia, Pakistan, Chile? The readers who are not yet born? And who is the more important reader – the woman immersed in a paperback on her way to work in the summer that it is published, or the university student of 2114 who connects with a dead author's words?

Was William Shakespeare imagining his 21st century readers as he penned his sonnets and plays? Could he have known that we would see our contemporary lives and politics reflected so urgently in his 16th century court societies, enchanted forests and sceptred isles?

³ *The Desert Fathers* by Helen Waddell; introduction by Basil Pennington (Vintage; 1998).

Future Library asks all of these questions. It confounds our neat distinctions of time. It complicates the future, suggesting that it is not a foreign country just as the past is not either, despite LP Hartley's famous phrase⁴. They might "do things differently there" but the present comes saturated with history and it is only from the present that the future can be born. Like the rings in the Norwegian spruces of Paterson's forest, so the past, present and future nestle around each other, concentric and interlinked.

Our imagined futures are so often about contemporary society. The most iconic literary utopias or dystopias project their present day fears into the future. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) was as much about his anxieties for 1930s Britain as it was his imaginings for AD 2540: we don't have to read far into the story to see his Europe peeping through the science fiction – high unemployment, the reverberations of the Wall Street Crash, the advent of American-led consumerism with Henry Ford's cars. In this imagined future Huxley is critiquing his present.

The science fiction of today is born out of our own anxieties too. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), as one example, depicts a near future that has developed virtual, rather than physical, borders, which many have seen as a reaction to Brexit and protectionist politics in relation to immigration.⁵ The recent television revival of Atwood's chilling dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has chimed with current fears to do with complex topics like gender and patriarchy.

The *Future Library* books, read in one hundred years time, will reveal much about us and our world. Their value and relevance to future readers will be the universal truths they carry about human behaviour, about our need to love, hate, make war, make peace.

Future Library reminds us how vital the past is to the future. By watering the saplings – writing the manuscripts we are tending to the future. It cannot happen if we do not lay down the groundwork now. The environmental message goes far beyond a library and a forest: this duality of preservation and creation asks us to take action, to conserve and protect, for the sake of tomorrow.

In recent years, there have been doomy speculations on the future of the physical book. Some have suggested that the era of the print press, begun by Gutenberg in the 15th century, is coming to its natural end as digital technology and e-reading continue to grow; the *Future Library* anthology might seem superannuated by 2114 if this is the case.

⁴ In his novel, *The Go-Between* (1953), LP Hartley says: "The Past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

⁵ In *The Observer's* review of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (Hamish Hamilton, 2017), the critic, Sukhdev Sandhu, calls it "a novel about migration and mutation, full of wormholes and rips in reality" (article published on Sunday 12 March 2017) while in *The Financial Times*, Hedley Twidle calls it a "thought experiment that pivots on the crucial figure of this century: the migrant." (Article published on 24 February 2017).

Yet reading patterns suggest otherwise. In 2017 there were reports of screen fatigue in the UK and a decline in e-reading⁶, along with a renaissance of the physical book as a collectible object. Julian Barnes may have sparked this rebirth when he won the Booker prize in 2011 and thanked his book designer, Susanne Dean, for making the dust jacket of *The Sense of An Ending* into a thing of beauty: “Those of you who have seen my book – whatever you may think of its contents – will probably agree that it is a beautiful object,” he said in his winning speech⁷ and the publishing world pricked up its ears.

Printed books, since then, appear to have become ever more exquisite as publishers understand that a beautiful cover might just be the secret weapon in the battle to keep physical formats alive. There is something so singularly satisfying about holding a book, admiring its cover, turning its pages and breaking its spine that cannot be replicated in digital form. We have experienced the feeling as children, and with our children. It is hard to imagine our children not sharing the same experience with theirs.

Whatever the format of the book in 2114, the story itself will not, cannot, die. The need to tell stories, and to evoke the imagination, penetrates to the core of our being human. From Homer’s oral tradition, to the Islamic Golden age in the symbolic figure of Scheherazade, who told stories to King Shahryar in order to stay alive in *One Thousand and One Nights*, right up to today’s Flash Fiction.

The compulsion to tell our stories remains strong even when they are filled with pain. In 1812 the novelist Fanny Burney wrote an explicit and eye-watering account to her older sister, Esther, of having a mastectomy, which, like all operations of her time was undertaken without the aid of anaesthetic: “when the dreadful steel was plunged into the breast—cutting through veins—arteries—flesh—nerves—I needed no injunctions not to restrain my cries. I began a scream that lasted unintermittingly during the whole time of the incision—and I almost marvel that it rings not in my Ears still! so excruciating was the agony!”⁸

It is relentless in its details and it is as if she needed to write the account as a testimony to the depth of her suffering – to have it witnessed by her reader. Those at Auschwitz during the Second World War wrote their own testimonies of suffering even as they were led into the gas chambers, and they show us how art, storytelling, and memoir, can be an act of self-assertion and defiance.

In his prison memoir *Wrestling with the Devil*, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o looks back at his year of incarceration as a political prisoner in 1978 and remembers writing a novel, in secret, on toilet paper. He speaks of how this creative act of covert rebellion helped him to survive. “Maximum security: the idea used

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<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/27/screen-fatigue-sees-uk-ebook-sales-plunge-17-as-readers-return-to-print>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/14/ebook-sales-continue-to-fall-nielsen-survey-uk-book-sales>

⁷ Reported by BBC News on [bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-15361273) on 19 October 2011; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-15361273>

⁸ *Fanny Burney: Selected Letters and Journals* edited by Joyce Hemlow (Oxford University Press; 1986). The original letter is in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York.

to fill me with terror whenever I met it in fiction,”⁹ he writes, and goes on to observe, “Now I know: paper, any paper, is about the most precious article for a political prisoner, more so for one, like me, who was imprisoned without trial for his writing. For the urge to write...”¹⁰

The urge to tell stories is closely aligned to the human need to dream, whichever reality we may be mired in. Paterson’s oeuvre shows a deep, ongoing fascination with notions of time but also the stars, the moon, and the great drama of space. In *The Dying Star Letters* the artist writes a letter to mourn every star that dies; *100 Billion Suns* reconceives massive cosmic explosions in outer space as shimmering eruptions of confetti; in *Timepieces (Solar System)* nine clocks each tell the time on the planets that comprise our solar system as well as the moon; *Totality* brings together every documented solar eclipse on the surface of a disco ball.

These works, to name a few, are about space in the literal sense, but also about touching worlds beyond ours. The interplay between stargazing and dreaming is apparent, as is the connection between science and art. They echo the sentiments of the late astrophysicist Stephen Hawking: “Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Try to make sense of what you see and wonder about what makes the universe exist.”¹¹

This is what the most enduring literature hopes to do too, whether it is about the past or the future. Imagination transcends time, and a story written today can be just as urgent, just as relevant when unearthed in 2114. *Future Library* invites us to look up to the stars, our imagination on fire, reaching out across time, across mortality, to the readers that we will become.

⁹ *Wrestling with the Devil: A Prison Memoir* by Ngûgî wa Thiong’o (Vintage; 2018 paperback reprint; p4).

¹⁰ *Ibid*; p7.

¹¹ Original speech made by Stephen Hawking (virtual presence at Sydney Opera House) in ‘An Evening with Stephen Hawking’, Sydney Opera House Talks and Ideas, on 26 April 2015; published on 27 April 2015 on YouTube; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ii7dsp6oCs>