

# Wellspring of Optimism, a Review of “Hieroglyph: Stories and Visions for a Better Future”

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Contemporary popular culture has a burden to carry. The mood of the global populace appears awash with a sense of desperate and dark days ahead for the planet, fuelled by debate over the attendant fallout of resource depletion, biodiversity collapse, climate weirdness, energy descent and population growth. Weighed down by a sense of un-nameable dread and impending doom, the fodder of everyday entertainment often reads as a litany of dystopia. It is little wonder, then, that many of our most popular contemporary works of fiction are based in socially imploding settings; parallel worlds in which personal power saves the day over make-believe monsters; or futuristic worlds where horror and oppression are rife.

Here, then, into the fray, comes the collaborative Futures project beguilingly titled *Hieroglyph: Stories and Visions for a Better Future*<sup>1</sup>. A project initiated by popular sci-fi author Neal Stephenson, (who provides an introduction to the book and its first story) in partnership with Arizona State University’s Center for Science and the Imagination, *Hieroglyph* seeks to present a collection of stories grounded in ‘techno-optimism’. The alliance itself has become an ongoing research project at ASU. The book that emerged from the collaboration, edited by Kathryn Cramer and Ed Finn, and published in 2014 by Harper Collins, is a wide-reaching exploration of Futures possibilities across a spectrum of social existence and technological potential, presented through the entertaining medium of fiction. Alongside the book there is an interactive website<sup>2</sup> where readers can follow up on information, see and hear interviews, read further articles regarding the crafting of individual stories, and most importantly, join in the discussion.

Finn and Cramer, in introducing *Hieroglyph*, claim the anthology represents ‘a blueprint for better dreams’, and offer the thought that well-written science fiction invites suspension of belief in order to share the dream. In a nod towards the dream’s achievement, the ‘win-win’ notion of ‘just sustainability’, resultant from technological advancement in various future worlds where both humanity and the natural world prevail, suggests that optimism provides more fertile ground for future impetus than the stultifying pessimism of horror-stricken renderings.

In *Elephant Angels* Brenda Cooper presages the deployment of drones in the control of wildlife poaching with effective results. A network of ‘angels’ based in Canada use the drones to monitor, pursue and capture elephant poachers on the African Savannah, illustrating the virtual omniscience of this currently burgeoning technology. In another treatment of drone technology, Lee Konstantinou, in *Johnny Appledrone vs. the FAA*, offers the usual dire view of drone social control, but balances it with the concept of a ‘Drone Commons’ where the fight

against information control continues. Though based in a dystopic future, optimism for the ‘victory of good over evil’ is embedded within the narrative, at the last advising the reader to ‘think for yourself’, and to occupy the Drone Commons with a balanced dose of humanity.

Many stories contained in *Hieroglyph* present future developments that enhance existence. *Girl in a Wave: Wave in a Girl* (Kathleen Ann Goonan) builds on the wisdom of Buckminster Fuller with a vision of humanity learning through creativity and self fulfilment; the result of altering our learning mode to embrace ‘grokking’ (meaning ‘to understand through profound empathy or intuition’). In the same vein, James L. Cambias in *Periapsis* describes body modification that controls hormones, employing implants to augment reality through ‘rapid prototyping’ to open creativity portals through optimal pairing of minds for maximum development potential. Dealing with human dysfunction gets a look-in with *Covenant* (Elizabeth Bear) illustrating a method to hack the human brain, dispensing ‘right-minding’ to cure neurological dysfunction responsible for criminal activity.

For this reviewer, there are several standout contributions. *The Man Who Sold the Moon* (Cory Doctorow) is an epic journey across time and space around one man’s vision to employ 3-D printing in the project to colonise the Moon. The construction of infrastructure, using moon-dust and nothing else, speaks of the human project writ large. *Degrees of Freedom* (Karl Schroeder) presents a delightfully Futurist exploration of the role of social media and futures-foresight processes in participatory democracy. ‘Big Data’ is employed in what effectively constitutes a kind of Causal Layered Analysis<sup>3</sup>, providing positive and workable solutions for the upholding of just sustainability in a tussle between native land rights and big oil. *Two Scenarios for The Future of Solar Energy* (Annalee Newitz) is a hope inspiring description of the practicalities of town planning and civil engineering in a future reliant on algae and sunlight as both the building blocks and sustenance of all human life. Bruce Sterling’s *Tall Tower* offers a wonderfully descriptive, slightly sentimental journey undertaken by a man and a horse, not across miles of landscape, but upwards through miles of fabricated geography, maintaining the sense of hopeful adventure that drives human ingenuity.

One or two stories perhaps fall short of proficiency in creative writing terms, but even so, all seventeen tales deliver various versions of the future that are grounded in technologies either in development, exploration or consideration today. They play with today’s building blocks, and present a possible tomorrow’s anticipative adaptation of them.

Literary critic Frederic Jameson suggests that if science fiction is but a conglomeration of all that we already know—that there is effectively nothing new under the sun—then science fiction runs the risk of spelling its own demise, yet at the same time he points out that the value lies not in what is spoken and achieved, but in what remains unsaid or unattained<sup>4</sup>. In this we are reminded that the human project is as much a result of its failures as its successes; hence stories open pathways that may bear fruit, or may lead to dead ends, and futurist tales can only be said to be one or the other when viewed from the future.

Science fiction, as the head honcho of literature’s offering towards futurist thinking, forms a neat melting pot in which technological and social concepts, currently nascent, occasionally find expression and efflorescence in the future. Indeed, science fiction since its inception is awash with the promise of technology

that may one day ‘come to pass’. In an age where fear and despair seem to be constantly, and cheerfully, lurking beneath the surface, new, alternative thinking can, and should, also work as a wellspring for conceptualising preferred futures.

Ultimately, the aim of science fiction is to make readers think. As Asimov remarked, science fiction is ‘a social experimentation on paper, social guesses plucked out of air’...the sort of experimentation that ‘accustom[s] the reader to the possibility of change, to have him think along various lines—perhaps very daring lines’<sup>5</sup>. Only rarely does it ‘get it right’, yet, ‘getting it right’ in the present, when speaking of the future, may not be a vital outcome. Perhaps of greater import is the opportunity for science itself to draw from science fiction the re-enchantment, the legitimation and the surge of optimism that drives hope, and brings persistence. Afterall, even if there truly is ‘nothing new under the sun’, the human story is embedded in the building blocks of nature, from which art is derived, and which in turn continually interprets those building blocks in new and innovative manners. The resultant widening of possibilities reminds us that the future is continually a work in progress. The *Hieroglyph* project manages to do just that, and in doing so, helps lighten the burden that seems to trouble contemporary popular culture.

## Notes

1. Finn, E & Cramer K (Eds) 2014, *Hieroglyph: Stories and Visions for a Better Future*, Harper Collins, New York, NY.
2. Arizona Board of Regents 2014, *Hieroglyph*, [website] Centre for Science and the Imagination, Arizona State University, <http://hieroglyph.asu.edu>
3. Inayatullah, S 1998, ‘Causal layered analysis: Poststructuralism as method’, *Futures* Vol 30., No.8, pp 815-829. Causal Layered Analysis is a futures-foresight tool developed by Professor Sohail Inayatullah as a method of ensuring deep understanding of an issue, and creating coherent futures.
4. Jameson, F 2005, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London, UK. p.viii.
5. Asimov, I 1953, ‘Social Science Fiction’ In Bretnor R (Ed) 1953, *Modern Science Fiction: Its Meaning and Its Future*, Advent Publishers, Chicago, IL.

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