

Literary and Cultural Investigations into the Effectiveness of Science Fiction Novels as a Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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With no clear answers to the lasting societal effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, let our creative writers provide the alternate possibilities. Science fiction novels project our systematic, environmental, and cultural anxieties by providing warnings and creating new gadgets, solutions, and portrayals of our present. The question is, why? Why do we need aliens, space creatures, and advanced technology to cope? These crucial sci-fi elements debunk our fears of change. Confronting readers with situations without cultural limitations allows them to embrace new ideas and potential “new normals.” Consider Ray Bradbury’s *The Illustrated Man*, and how effectively he imagined technological possibilities and their societal repercussions; or Ursula Le Guin, who uses science fiction and cultural changes within her imagined universes to probe its societal consequences. Sci-fi novels test the boundaries set in place by our current cultural and societal standards; that is what makes them fiction. The best sci-fi novels feel only slightly different from our current reality; that slight difference could be the change that we crave.

I call on our creative writers. Approachable to a wide range of audiences, creative writers are the “imagineers” needed to envision a potential future. Like George Nada in the sci-fi short story “Eight O’clock in the Morning,” let us awaken and understand that our current structures no longer serve us. And, like our creative writers,

let us imagine a better world. These novels are the solutions; the prototypes we need to question the cultural laws we currently follow and to imagine new possibilities within our society.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic caused an unforeseen societal, cultural, and political shift that still permeates the present. The initial response, two years ago, was to implement stay-at-home and mask mandates. These necessary mandates resulted in isolation, touch-deprivation, divisiveness, and, for those privileged enough to be at home full-time, deep self-reflection. With nothing more to do than stare at our screens and watch the news unfold minute-to-minute, individuals who were once subscribed to a daily routine of eat, sleep, and work were given a pause. And although the negatives certainly outweigh the positives, the Covid-19 pandemic did impact daily life enough for individuals to re-imagine their world. Abandoning what we know allowed many to recognize flaws not only personally but also on a national and even global level. Disruption and uncertainty are scary. While some sought comfort through hobbies and watching the news, others looked for understanding, the kind found in a science fiction novel.

Station Eleven, written in 2014 by Emily St. John Mandel, is a science fiction novel that takes place in a world plagued by a deadly virus, devastating the globe and wiping out most of the population. The novel, while meant to parallel the Swine Flu, shares striking similarities to the events that took place at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although more contagious than the coronavirus, the novel's flu still highlights the loss, isolation, and uncertainty felt by many worldwide. Though it is important to note the similarities found in the novel (the scenes that address widespread panic, the empty grocery store shelves, the newscaster rhetoric, and the isolation), more compelling is St. John Mandel's depiction of the aftermath. The imagined world is underpopulated with no electricity, contemporary technology or any semblance of modernity, and yet what prevails is theater. The arts resurge as a necessity rather than a luxury, and the ability to perform draws the line between survival and living. For context, one of the main characters performs in a Traveling Symphony of artists who caravan around the Chicago area, performing Shakespeare and classical music to welcoming settlements or communities. Those living in settlements animate and cheer at the sight of the traveling band of artists; for the duration of a performance, they forget their reality.

The decline of arts education in public schools acts as a real-world comparison with St. John Mandel's novel. While arts

education has been underfunded for decades, the Covid-19 pandemic brought newfound challenges including budget cuts and decreased accessibility as a result of remote learning. The American Academy of Art & Sciences, aware of the decline in arts education programs, in 2021 compiled a report titled *Art for Life's Sake: The Case for Arts Education*. This report, as stated by the President of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, “[recognizes] the vital role arts education plays in developing empathetic, well-rounded, and civically engaged individuals.”¹ Although ninety-one percent of Americans, in 2018, agreed “that the arts are part of a well-rounded K–12 education,” our current public school system reveals an institution misaligned with the majority.² St. John Mandel imagined art, music, and theater as vital. In her novel, art is living, and survivors praise, adore, and consider essential the people talented enough to memorize and perform the works of Shakespeare. The difference in priorities, highlighted in the novel *Station Eleven*, compels readers to envision an existence where the arts take precedence over core academics. Although the novel presents a world with extreme conditions, the societal parameters are malleable, giving readers a chance to imagine a new arts-prioritized reality.

Along with disrupting arts education funding, the Covid-19 pandemic emphasized injustices and fueled activism, broadcasting it to many Americans stuck at home. The high number of movements reawakened during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic caused mass public protest and sharpened the boundaries set in place by opposing groups. One demographic category increasingly affected by the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic is women.

With fears of population decline as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2020, several U.S. states “made public health emergency declarations to specifically define abortion as non-essential...and [states like Texas, Iowa, Alabama and Oklahoma] banned abortions until the end of the emergency.”³ The public

¹ David Oxtoby, “Art for Life's Sake.” American Academy of Arts & Sciences, September 1, 2021. <https://www.amacad.org/publication/case-for-arts-education>.

² Randy Cohen, “Americans Speak out about the Arts in 2018: an in-Depth Look at Perceptions and Attitudes about the Arts in America.” Americans for the Arts, May 15, 2019.

³ Laurie Sobel and Amrutha Ramaswamy, “State Action to Limit Abortion Access during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” KFF, August 11,

health emergency declaration complicated attaining safe abortions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, in 2023, with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, this divisive public health crisis is at the forefront of political, medical, and feminist agendas. Women and their relationship with their bodies have often been reimaged in sci-fi and speculative fiction. Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, set in a dystopian future where an alarming decrease in birth rates results in the enslavement of the remaining few fertile women in the United States, thoroughly explores gender roles, power dynamics, and control. Grounded in United States history as well as in current events, this speculative fiction novel depicts an amplified and inflated version of the patriarchy. Atwood magnifies the issue to an extent that critiques, radicalizes, and exposes the truth within. This speculative fiction novel is a cautionary tale. Rather than proposing solutions, the novel warns readers of a world too far gone, a world where enforced childbirth is inescapable. In this instance, speculative fiction acts as a guardrail for readers. The genre distances our reality enough from the exaggerated created existence, making the topics digestible to those newly confronting the problems discussed. Speculative fiction encourages understanding and facilitates conversations surrounding difficult, often avoided, issues within our society.

At the beginning of this essay, I called on our creative writers to envision a new world for audiences. I do not expect science fiction authors to save the world; it is not their job to solve the structural flaws within our society. And their talent, capable of confronting readers with their hopes and anxieties surrounding change, is only effective when people are reading it. Unfortunately, the stigmas surrounding science fiction keep many away from the genre. Often deemed "not real literature," sci-fi novels' intellectual integrity is frequently overlooked and regarded by traditional academics as "juvenile," "escapist," and "poorly written." Although elitism and the painfully slow evolution of public-school curriculums are ubiquitous, stigmas constantly break with each sci-fi novel explored in the classroom. Sci-fi's inclusion in public school curriculum, whether through assigned novels, movies, or television shows, is necessary. At the 2003 California Library Association conference, San Diego Mesa College librarian Val Ontell advocated for such change. Ontell, having experienced first-

2020, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/state-action-to-limit-abortion-access-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

hand the avoidance of sci-fi novels in the public school system, highlighted the genre's effectiveness towards explaining difficult topics, stimulating imagination, and facilitating questions in youth.⁴ Science fiction novels welcome alternate possibilities—ones often overlooked without the genre's imaginative power.

Though I discourage assigning *The Handmaid's Tale* to a class of seventh graders, there are appropriate options for all ages and reading abilities. Suzanne Collins's series *The Hunger Games* teaches themes associated with revolution, oppression, and class inequality and explores a world where human suffering is entertainment for the wealthy. Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* touches on humanity versus nature and the idea of technology as a privilege. Neal Shusterman's 2016 young adult novel *Scythe* examines overpopulation and immortality through the eyes of an empowered teen protagonist, elucidating the repercussions of living in an "utopia." With increased application in the classroom, students will recognize and appreciate the genre's usefulness and, consequently, may begin to further question the society created before them.

We are living in a time in which the necessity of this new perspective is unquestionable, and the relationship between sci-fi writer and reader is paramount. Science fiction authors challenge us to think beyond what we know, offering us alternate realities and tools to transform our existence. And although the long-term societal effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are still unclear, let us look to our sci-fi novels for guidance, understanding, and comfort.

⁴ Val Ontell, "Imagine That!," *Community & Junior College Libraries* 12, no. 1 (2004): 57–70. https://doi.org/10.1300/j107v12n01_09.

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