

Six things studying the future has taught me about fiction writing

On my foresight blog, I posted the reverse of this: "Six things fiction writing taught me about foresight" [[LINK](#)]



Since the late 1980s, I've worked in the field of futures studies, also known as foresight. I am a consultant to any organization that will hire me to explore how the world is changing and where they might see challenges and find opportunities in that change. That work prepared me in certain ways for writing fiction. In fact, a big part of the work of a futurist is like writing fiction. Nothing is wholly known or provable about the future, so, in essence, you make it up. But like a novelist, you make up something based on logic, truth, and facts. My fiction work is based in history, and I stick to contextual setting truths about history, even as I have my way with my human characters within that reality.

Here are some key things I've carried from my work as a futurist to my efforts as a novelist:

1. Technology changes, but it's the human changes that spring from that which matter most. I don't write science fiction, but even Sci-Fi, in my limited experience with it, is really about the human things that technology does.
2. Placement in time of a story is a critical step and in that setting you have to get the conjecture right; avoiding anachronisms and being as true as anyone can be to the times you are writing about. Whether a story is set in the future or the past, it's important work to avoid putting too much of today's values into the minds of people of another time. This is unavoidable, but we still have to try.
3. The world is a complex of systems connected to systems. Nothing is simple, and nothing has just one cause.
4. Conjecture is essential, and I've had the chance to build a habit of, and comfort with conjecture over years of working to suppose things about the future.

5. Storytelling has proven essential to getting across ideas about change in my work as a futurist. The stories meet what's already in people's heads, what George Lakoff calls "frames". In fiction, your story doesn't have much success unless it does that. So though we strive for originality, our characters may fit archetypes and other known qualities that the reader brings.

6. Exaggeration, or sharp contrasts, may make the difference in storytelling, as they do in getting ideas about the future across to people. So, even if we don't think it will ever happen, we may spend time talking or writing as futurists about "what ifs" such as "zero waste" or "free energy." In fiction, the lives of our characters cannot just be ordinary lives, at least not without something big happening too. We exaggerate, you could say, or at least draw sharp contrasts.

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